THE WRONG TOMORROW

Stories by Seth Kallen Deitch

The Wrong Tomorrow

incorrect speculations

By

Seth Kallen Deitch

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The Cohort

Preamble

The gods care for humanity in ways we can barely understand. Sometimes one or all of them will grant a human who has pleased them a special boon. Such became the case with Simon Ardley.

Doctor Simon Ardley labored his whole life to find a cure for cancer and finally did so. He was much honored for this work. Worldwide celebrity, Nobel Prize, hospitals, colleges and elementary schools named in his honor. The city of Portland, Oregon, his home town, changed its name to Ardley! In spite of this Simon Ardley had nursed a secret disappointment his whole life. As a boy he had earnestly hoped to grow up to be a fireman, but his father, also a doctor, pushed him into medicine. For the world, this turned out to be a very good thing, but the disappointment was still there even after all of the satisfaction, fame and honors. The day came where he lay dying, not from cancer of course. He lay in a hospital bed during his last hours when he sensed a presence. He was drugged against pain, but conscious after a fashion and he knew it when something or someone had touched him.

Suddenly his mind was clear he was standing in a room and across the room from him stood Hermes, messenger of the gods. Let it be understood that Simon Ardley still lay in that bed, but Hermes had chosen to communicate directly to his mind.

He looked at Ardley with eyes that were so deep that all of the world could be swallowed up by them. “Hello Doctor Ardley. I bring a message from Olympus!”

Simon was perplexed. “Olympus! Nonsense! I’m a Christian.”

Hermes creased the corners of his mouth ever so slightly. “Humans may believe what they wish, Doctor Ardley, but as a man of science, you of all people must be well aware that no matter what *beliefs* we adopt, reality is what it is! Is it your Christian God who stands before you or an Olympian?”

Simon was silent for a moment. “You said something about a message?”

“Indeed I did. The gods have taken note of your good works. You are the greatest man of your generation!

Ardley was used to hearing things like that said of him and by reflex responded with false modesty. “Oh surely I’m not….”

The god cut him off. “None of that doctor Ardley! The gods never judge falsely!” He paused a beat. “I come bearing a gift. Your contribution has been so great that the gods have granted you a wish.”

“A wish!” He paused. “I can wish for anything?”

“We control the universe. Our powers are limitless.”

“I wish my life had turned out differently!”

Hermes held up his hand. “I’m sorry. There *are* rules. One of them is that you cannot change the past. Not even a little bit. The die has been cast on all that has gone before. We do this in every generation. Typically the honoree chooses to rise from his deathbed healthy or for wealth for his family. Some have wished for world peace, but that’s against the rules also. Ares won’t allow it. You also cannot wish yourself more wishes.”

“Can’t wish them for *myself*. Hmm.”

Hermes arched his brow. “What are you thinking, human?”

“Well I can’t go back and relive my life and even if I get up from this bed healthy, I wouldn’t be able to go and live that life. Alright then, perhaps I can give that gift to others.” He closed his eyes and made his wish. “I wish that every seven year old in the country will grow up to be whatever they want to be at this special precious moment of their lives!”

The god looked taken aback, but he nodded and vanished. Simon Ardley passed away peacefully later that night and entered the Elysian Fields with great honors.

20 Years Later

The view of the street from the rooftops always made me feel right. I belong here in the night watching over the city. This is the life of Bolo. This night I spied a drug deal going down, just a bag being passed for cash, small potatoes, but there was nothing more important going on. I leapt from the roof swinging on one of my lines and landed on my feet silently beside them. “Hand it over.” I said.

The dealer’s head snapped around as did that of his customer. The customer bolted but I tossed a bolo line and brought him down with his legs trussed. The dealer pulled a knife, but obviously didn’t know how to use it. I knocked it out of his hand and tied him up as well. I dropped them off at the police station with their little bag of powder. While I was there a blue and red costumed man flew down and landed on the sidewalk holding a terrified looking guy in a hocky jersey. “Lightning Man! What have we got here?”

“Mugger.” He said. “His victim is on the way to make a report. What about you?”

“Drug deal. I have the seller, the buyer and the product! Well, nice running into you, I should be going.”

“Sure. See you later Bolo!”

I tossed a bolo line and ascended back to the roof tops.

Every so often I muse about how the world suddenly changed a few years back when I thought I was destined for an ordinary life.

Since the masked heroes started appearing throughout the country about seven years ago, we have actually made a big difference in urban crime! Bolo was all I ever wanted to be. I feel like this is the life I am meant to have. My skin doesn’t deflect bullets like Lightning Man and my girlfriend worries about me some, but I have never been hurt real bad. Her name is Stella and she is a ballerina. It’s a good time for her because ballet has just exploded in popularity these last few years. There are dance companies just about everywhere. New York City alone has two hundred of them.

People like me have actually become important because American society is just getting stranger and stranger. There have been odd threats to the public order. Luckily, as well as the masked heroes, there is no shortage of police officers, but they are not as well equipped to handle the strange as a super hero.

Becoming Bolo was weird enough. As a child I was thin and weak. I didn’t excel at sports. I spent most of my time reading comic books. When I was a little kid, I dreamed of growing up to be a super hero! As I grew older I set my sights on more prosaic goals. I entered college in engineering with my eye on a future in systems administration or information technology, but starting on my twenty-first birthday changes started happening. In a matter of a few short months I put on a huge amount of muscle, I found that my stamina had increased and that I had heretofore undiscovered prodigious acrobatic and fighting skills. My doctor was impressed and said that there was nothing wrong with me.

I found that my interests were changing. I switched majors to criminal justice and also took up a heavier science program. It wasn’t just me who was changing. My entire class seemed to have switched gears. Many of them just plain dropped out or switched to other schools. That was when Stella just dropped accounting and changed majors to performing arts and dance. She got really good really fast.

My best friend, Ronald, who had been working toward a law degree suddenly went into the Air Force and within a year was in astronaut training! Eddie, another close friend switched from biochemistry to political science. I

asked him why and he said with absolute assurance that he was going to be president some day.

I understood that assurance. Everyone around me thought that I was heading toward being a really great cop, a detective probably, but deep inside the truth was emerging, a persistent internal voice that said "You are Bolo!" At first I thought the notion was completely insane. There is no room in the world for a real masked vigilante! Almost without volition, I started to assemble the elements of the costume, fashioned folding grappling hooks and lines, became a bolo expert and ultimately started having various typed of bolos and other implements made. I told myself it was just for fun, but when the costume was finished and I put it on for the first time, I knew that this was right, that this was who I really am! It was that same week that Mighty Man first appeared, the first of several super powered heroes. I don't have actual super abilities like some other guys, but I'm still faster and stronger than most people. Someone beat me to the punch of being the first super hero in New York City, but I was the second. That first month there were forty super heroes. By the next month there were one hundred and twenty! When I collared my first evil-doer, a mugger and it was a tremendous rush! This is what I was meant to do.

Somewhere in there I was invited to my twin sister Debbie's coronation as Princess of Ossining. It's the town where we were born. She suddenly dropped her psychology studies and went back there to declare that she was the "natural sovereign" of the town. Instead of having her put in an institution, they agreed! Apparently she just radiated *princessness*. Somehow she also got five times better looking. Not just healthier, her features became more symmetrical, her hair glossier, her figure changed for the better. Not just a princess, a *beautiful* princess. She doesn't have any real political power, but she wears beautiful dresses and a crown everywhere she goes in her carriage drawn by white horses and everyone addresses her as "Your Highness". When we were seven, being a princess was all she would talk about. It was at the coronation, which I attended with my Bolo suit on under my clothes when it struck me that at the same age all I could think about was being a super hero! Both my sister and I grew up to be exactly what we wanted to be when we were seven. I and many other people were starting to realize that *everybody* who was seven at the same time I was grew up to be what they wanted then. A year either side of us have perfectly normal lives, but the group that is my age are special. Upon achieving adulthood the ambition of our inner child took over! Something unprecedented had happened to us. No one has ever figured out what it was.

By the time I was twenty-five, the whole world had noticed. Almost no

one of my age worked in a factory or digging ditches, installing cable television, serving fast food or exterminating rodents. A hell of a lot of us were cowboys though, in spite of the fact that beef consumption was on the decline. There was no shortage of fire fighters or detectives my age. For a while there was huge competition for attention between motorcycle daredevils. That didn't last more than a few years as the majority got themselves killed early on. The ones left were capable of truly improbable stunts. The news outlets were calling us the Gifted Cohort or more often just *The Cohort*. People not in the news profession were more apt to think of us as weirdoes or even perverts. Our group existed outside of the laws of probability, in my case outside the borders of rationality.

It surprised some commentators that none of us were porn stars. We might have all been if it was ambition of our fourteen-year-old selves had been satisfied, but our professions had been determined by pre-pubescent imaginations. Early on sociologists figured out that we were all what we wanted to be when we were seven. Even so, there are a few super-pimps. Few of the males became entertainers, but there are a lot of singers, actresses and models among the females. Primary grade teachers are well represented. There are also very many incredibly skilled nurturing mothers/homemakers. Even in our times, so many wanted to grow up to be "mommies". There will be another population anomaly of healthy and well adjusted people raised by these women to follow ours. Of course, almost every locale has a resident princess. There are many doctors, but many fewer lawyers. Explorers and scientists are common, priests less so. There are an overwhelming number of males in professional sports.

Equally as baffling as those of us who gained super human abilities are those who spontaneously changed their physical sex upon their majority. Not just the stuff you can see on the outside, the chromosomes and everything. The medical world was stunned, but completely unable to account for the transformations. Not one of them was dissatisfied by the unprecedented turn of events.

Many of us have fought our tendency. Like most people, our interests change as we mature. The seven-year-old who wanted to become a football star in all likelihood set his sights on law or business as a young man only to find upon his twenty-first birthday every fiber of his being drawing him to and shaping him for the NFL! We are controlled by destiny much more so than other people. Our professions are not what we do as much as what we are. Some of the time I must live my life uncostumed with a different job in a different identity using the name I was born with, but that name is now just

a disguise. It is not that person who dresses up as Bolo, but the other way around.

The Guild

At the monthly guild meeting I was seated next to Thudd which some people might find intimidating, but he and I were friends. He was actually quite personable for a nine foot monster that could throw a car a half mile. A chair couldn't support his weight, he is not only large but also dense weighing just short of two tons, so the guild had a large cube of granite cut to be his seat at meetings and social events. He was an ebony-skinned mass of corded muscle whose face generally seemed to wear an angry scowl in spite of his actual even temperament. Unlike most of the other super-heroes, he wore no costume, only cut-off shorts apparently made from jeans for a very fat man that looked like a Speedo on him.

"How ya been, man?" I asked as I sat down.

"Thudd is content. Thudd spent much of weekend cleaning out pigeon nests." Thudd always speaks of himself in the third person and hardly ever uses articles. No one, including himself knows why. He was cleaning out pigeon nests because he lives at the top of the Chrysler Building. The space was given for his use by Cooper Union in recognition of the fact that he provides security to the neighborhood. He had been there less than a year and had yet to completely seal the space against the elements. As Thudd was more or less impervious to heat or cold, he didn't see it as a priority. "You do anything on weekend?"

"Stella and I went up to Debbie's place and enjoyed a day of royal treatment. Our parents were there. It was fun. You really ought to come some time! Stella had a performance on Sunday so I spent the day working out with my bolos. I've got a new one that can cast a line all the way across Fifth Avenue!"

"Thudd would not fit in. Thudd not like you. Thudd has no secret identity. Thudd is always Thudd."

I have never learned what Thudd's name was growing up or what plans he had had for his life. Anything he has ever said about his past has been during the less than ten years he has lived as Thudd since the amazing transformation that occurred on his twenty-first birthday. "Hey Thudd, we're friends! Super heroes are allowed to have friends. That's it. You're coming the next time we go visit. Debbie would love to meet you. Her Highness enjoys having friends who are special!"

At that point, the meeting was called to order by guild president, The Crimson Cloud. A tall, raven-haired woman with a knock-out figure that was displayed with very little left to the imagination in a skin hugging body suit so snug that many suspected was actually painted on. She had only fought crime for six months before she became guild president. She did possess the amazing ability to pass through solid objects like a ghost, but her fighting techniques were limited and, though superbly athletic, her strength was strictly within normal bounds. Before becoming The Crimson Cloud she had been working toward a career in business and found that managing the guild suited her. Her appearance also made her a memorable figurehead. “The meeting of the Guild of Extraordinary Guardians of Greater New York is now called to order. Before we begin, I would like to introduce two new members.” She pointed to a short, muscular blond woman in blue tights with a large “M” on her chest, who rose from her chair smiling and waved to those assembled. “This is Mighty Mary who just moved here from St. Louis.” She then pointed to a thin man who sat in the second row who wore an ordinary suit with a black cape and a mask that covered his face entirely including his eyes. He floated out of his chair still in sitting position and nodded to the rest of the guild. “And this is Professor Mystery. I hope you will all introduce yourselves and make them both feel at home.”

“I just want to remind everybody again that there is *no smoking* in the building!” The previous month, Enigmatico had lit up a Chesterfield in the men’s room setting off a smoke alarm. *Thirty* firemen had shown up disrupting the meeting for three quarters of an hour! He ended up being fined by both the city and the guild. His ability to “perplex the mind” had helped him not one bit.

“All right, I think that’s it for announcements. I wanted to tell everyone to be on alert. There have been strange happenings in Brooklyn. Improbable things have been going on. Several big hits on lottery tickets in a short time, remissions from terminal diseases, etcetera. We have been watching the area and had been not worrying too much until two local girls showed up at their proms in fancy horse drawn carriages. These events have been mostly restricted to Flatbush or people who recently resided there. Nothing that could be called a ‘crime’ has been committed related to these incidents, but we need to investigate and discover the source before one is.”

There were three superheroes local to Flatbush. The Screech, a woman that wore a bird costume, could fly and had a voice that could shatter glass, Big Brother, a burly strong man who concerned himself mostly with child molesters and Battling Sampson (often referred to as the Kosher Knight by his fans) who was currently hospitalized with multiple broken bones. Neither

Screech nor Big Brother had heard much of this but both welcomed outside help in the matter. Since Manhattan had more than its share of supers, I volunteered knowing that the city would be covered without me for a little while.

Flatbush

The rooftops of Flatbush were different from the high towers of Manhattan. I had to shorten up my lines to stay clear of the cars when I swung from them. There were a couple of people I wanted to make contact with and I decided that a personal visit rather than a phone call was the way to go.

Before I got too far into my survey of the town I spotted something below me, a gleaming golden car and it wasn't just a paintjob. I unhitched my line and dropped down in front of it. It came to a screeching halt. It was a Cadillac Eldorado apparently made of solid gold. The passenger side door burst open and a skinny teen-aged boy emerged. He was wearing a purple suit, had several thick gold chains hanging from his neck and he was wearing a gold crown. That's right, a *crown*. "Who the fuck are *you*?" He demanded.

"I'm Bolo, I'm from Manhattan. Who are you?"

"Who am I? I'm the Duke of Flatbush, motherfucker! That's whose car you just stopped for no reason."

The kid couldn't have been older than sixteen. He wasn't Cohort. He had gotten his wish some other way. I took a step closer to the car. There were two dolled up women in the back seat, both at least ten years older than the kid. The driver's face was in shadow, but I could see that he was a uniformed chauffeur. "Nice car!" I said. "How did you get it?"

"What? You think I jacked it somewhere? This is *my* car, motherfucker! I don't think I'm going to let you waste any more of my time." He turned back to the car and said, "Hey Johnson, get this bitch out of my way!"

The driver side door opened and the driver stepped out, all seven feet of him, a gold robot chauffeur/bodyguard. I took a few steps backward toward the curb and the robot took a swing at me. I ducked and his fist went straight through a light pole behind me.

I'm strong, real strong. I have to be in order to swing from my lines, but I'm not *super strong* and certainly not indestructible. If even one punch from that robot connected, it would kill me, it was that simple. I tossed up a bolo

line and swung off as fast as I could. I heard the kid behind me as I headed off into the night. “That’s right! You better run, punk! Nobody fucks with the Duke!”

I needed to get my bearings. I went to find my first contact.

Princess Wanda of Flatbush lived in a bedazzled pink two story house on East Seventeenth Street. “Some masked man showing up at my door in the middle of the night! Don’t you believe in the telephone?”

“I beg your pardon, Your Highness, this was a matter of some urgency and your number is unlisted.”

She bore a striking resemblance to Beyoncé in her prime, exactly my age of course. Her nightgown and robe were magnificently embroidered with peacocks and playful cherubs. “You know a princess needs to get her beauty sleep.” She muttered grumpily.

Thanks to my sister Debbie, I knew how to talk to a princess. “Any more, Your Highness and your beauty might be so dazzling as to leave me speechless!”

She looked at me with amused impatience. “But I’m not that lucky because you’re still talkin’. I think you had better tell me why you are here.”

“Do you know the Duke of Flatbush?”

I could tell that I had her interest. “I’d better wake up my handmaiden and have her make some coffee.” She pointed to a door. “The throne room is over there. I’ll get dressed and meet you there in five minutes.”

The “throne room” was actually a living room, but a richly decorated one. It looked like it was Christmas in the middle of summer. The Princess’s throne was a plush armchair on a dais in one corner, but she didn’t sit on it, but rather across from me on the couch. We both sipped coffee out of Wedgewood cups. In the center of the coffee table was a dish of ornately frosted petit fours that sat untouched. “The Duke just showed up out of nowhere three weeks ago. I have only met him once when he came to pay his respects, if you want to call it that. He kept on calling me ‘Wanda’. No ‘Your Highness’, nuh-uh, that kid is too good to show a little respect. I wanted to say ‘off with his head!’ just to see what he would do, but I’m not mean like that. He and the two floozies he brought with him ate up half the food in the house before they would leave. I wouldn’t mind having something like that bodyguard of his though.”

“Anything else going on that seems a bit off?”

“Well, another princess moved into the neighborhood from Westchester, but she hasn’t made any claims on my throne. She’s been keeping her distance. She turned down my dinner invitation. I still haven’t met her face to face. She was Melissa, Princess of White Plains. I don’t know anything

about her plans. Also a lot of folks seem to have struck it rich lately, exactly how is between them and the tax-man I suppose, but let's face it, Flatbush is not where you generally find Bill Gates and his kind. And, there are a few guys like you, but *younger*."

"That seems unlikely."

"You do not have to tell me! It's weird! You keep poking around and you'll probably run into 'em."

I thanked Princess Wanda and was on my way.

My next stop was at the laboratory of Doctor Scientist on Beverly Road. The place was converted from what used to be several storefronts. I had actually been here before. Doctor Scientist had made a number of my trick bolos for me, at quite reasonable prices I might add. I knew him from college back when he was Ari Shapiro. The title "doctor" purely honorary, he dropped out of school when he realized they couldn't teach him anything. He is one of the handful of people who knows my secret identity. He figured out who I was the first time he met me in costume. He's smart like that and then some.

I was not the least bit surprised to find him awake and hard at work at two in the morning. The rumor is that he only sleeps an hour a day.

A loading dock door was open so I just went in and called out "Doctor Scientist!" The place was jam packed with stuff, but still neat. Huge and cryptic machines, forklifts, yards of shelves full of equipment and supplies, machine shop tools everywhere, etc.

A voice answered from above. "Hello! Hey look who it is. My old friend Bolo! What are you doing in Brooklyn?" He was above me standing in the air. He was using a tool of some sort on a huge gorilla-shaped robot. The robot didn't even faze me. *He was standing on air!* He turned and descended to the floor as if he were in an elevator.

"When did you learn to fly?"

He pointed to his shoes which I now noticed were covered with Jack Kirby style printed circuitry. "Anti-gravity shoes!"

"Holy jeeze!" I breathed. "That's going to make you a zillion bucks!"

"Maybe someday. They are far from trouble free and would be expensive to manufacture. Pretty cool though, right?"

"I'll say!"

"So, to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure at..." He checked his watch, "...Four-ten in the morning?"

"Our guild chairwoman has been getting reports of strange happenings in the neighborhood."

“Hmmm, yes. Your guild chairwoman. Quite a ‘lady’!” It wasn’t well known, but The Crimson Cloud was among those who had reversed sex when the change had come. Not everyone was equally comfortable with that. “Some of those reports came from me, seeming violations of probability. I thought at first that I might have been causing them because I had been doing some experiments in time-flux, but my equipment was adequately shielded. I double and triple checked. I made a report to the Guild of Super Scientists, but no one has a definite theory as of yet.” There are nowhere near as many super scientists as there are super heroes and they tend to be quite busy. Doctor Scientist is one of only a few who have not been drafted by the Defense Department, but they still watch him closely.

“Do you think there is a second Cohort?”

“Not like us. Those affected are of all ages and the changes are not of the same sort. A lot more seem to have purely monetary gains. There have also been several rejuvenations. Stuff like that is rare in our group. Many of us are very wealthy, but wealthy sports stars or wealthy movie stars. Things like that. This thing has seen a lot of people hit the lottery or win big on game shows and people like the Duke.”

“So you know the Duke of Flatbush?”

“Yes. What a dumbass. He hired me to fix his robot when it broke an arm punching through a brick wall. The thing is almost pure solid gold! I figure it’s worth at least fifty million dollars, but it breaks and bends pretty easily. Gold is a poor choice to make precision mechanical parts from. He wasn’t talking about how he got the car and the robot or that damned silly crown. He was pretty defensive about it. He just said it was his and he didn’t steal it.”

“Have you met any of the others?”

“Yes. They’re all pretty secretive. This whole business worries me quite a bit. I have no idea what happens when the laws of probability are really interfered with, but I’ll bet it isn’t good. Maybe the whole universe could unravel. Whatever it is that is going on, it really needs to stop.”

I wasn’t learning much I hadn’t already heard. I told him that I was interested anytime the anti gravity shoes became available and bid the good doctor farewell.

Sunrise was about a half hour away and I needed sleep. I switched to street clothes behind a dumpster and took the subway back home.

The next night I was swinging above the streets of Flatbush when I was dazzled by something impossibly bright. I lost my grip on the bolo line, but fell only about ten feet onto a tar paper roof. The brightness subsided

somewhat and I saw a person standing nearby on the roof with crackling electricity crawling all over his body. It was a kid with short spiky brown hair, a boy no more than ten years old. He wore an electric blue leotard with a stylized white lightning bolt on his chest with a red letter "T" on it.

I stared at the kid as I slowly tried to get to my feet. He held up a hand and a huge spark jumped out at me and knocked me back over. It rattled me good! "Who the heck are you?" I wheezed.

"You can call me Taser Lad." He sounded like he was trying to make his voice lower than it really was. "What are you snooping around here for?"

"I'm Bolo. Please don't shoot lightning at me again. I'm a good guy. I'm just doing some research."

"I've heard of you. Don't you work Manhattan?"

"Yeah.", I said as I finally got to my feet. "My guild asked me to check out what's going on in Flatbush."

"Why? What's going on?"

"You, among other things. How did you get to be the way you are?"

He looked at me blankly for a couple of seconds and then said, "I was exposed to gamma rays."

I tried hard not to sigh or roll my eyes. "C'mon kid, what *really* happened? Ya know what happens when people are exposed to gamma rays? They get cancer, that's what."

"It's a secret. I can't tell you. It would be like me asking you to take your mask off."

"Ya want me to take my mask off? I'll take my mask off!" I took my mask off. "See?"

"Now I know your secret identity!"

"No you don't. You don't have any more of a clue who I am than you did a second ago. I'm just some guy you never heard of. Were you expecting a celebrity? I'm Bolo. *That's* what I do. I've done it since I turned twenty-one, just like the rest of the Cohort. Now you, I think up until a little while ago you were just going to school and playing soccer or whatever and hanging out with your pals and then something happened to make you into Taser Lad and it wasn't gamma rays and it wasn't what made me what I am."

"I can't tell you!" He said with his voice sounding more normally kid-like. He dropped into a sort of martial arts kind of stance and I made ready to jump off the roof in case he decided to shoot lightning at me again, but he just leapt into the air and flew off surrounded by crackling sparks.

"Shit." I muttered as I pulled my mask back over my head.

Doctor Scientist poured me a second cup of coffee. “Taser Lad, eh? I’ve heard of him. Never met him.”

“He’s just some kid playing games, but he’s pretty powerful. He can fly. Shoots lightning bolts out of his hands. It seemed like stuff that you could make.”

“Bolo! You must not think much of me if you believe I would give equipment like that to a young boy! From what I hear, he has genuine super powers.”

“How could that happen? He handed me a line of bull about gamma rays, but there was obviously some big secret. Who else is there besides him and the Duke?”

“You can look up Morris Edelman. He won top prize in the New York, Connecticut and the Multi-State Hyper Bux lotteries on one week! He had his name legally changed to ‘Billionaire Morris Edelman’! The papers started calling him ‘Billy’.” I had heard of Billy Edelman. He made Donald Trump look restrained and tasteful by comparison.

“He’s from Flatbush?”

“He used to live only a block from here. Now he has an apartment on Fifth Avenue while his tower is being built.”

The Bright Lights

It was nice to be back in my element among the high towers of Manhattan. I had checked out Edelman’s tower which would be the third tallest building in the world when completed. The plan was for it to have a blazing sign at the summit that said simply EDELMAN in ten-foot letters. Nothing but class.

Edelman had the entire top floor of 907 Fifth Avenue. I alit on a deck next to a sliding glass door. Edelman was sipping brandy from a huge snifter. A woman in an evening gown was playing a gold trimmed grand piano. I tapped on the glass. Edelman looked up startled. The woman stopped playing and turned to look. I recognized her as Angelica Beaton, the ABS news anchor. Edelman put down his glass and signaled to a girl in a maid’s uniform. She opened the door and said in a timid voice, “Yes?”

“I’m Bolo. May I have a word with Mister Edelman?”

“Edelman got up and came to the door and elbowed the maid aside. “Bolo! The famous doer of good deeds! Come in sir!” He gripped my hand

in his. He had a thick gold ring on every finger. “What brings you to my humble abode tonight?”

Everything in the place was just a little bit over the top. Lots of gold leaf on the porcelain lamps, a glittering crystal chandelier that was just a touch too big for the room. Over the huge fireplace hung a large oil painting of a Rubenesque nude with butterfly wings in an ornate gilded frame. The painting was skillfully executed but on the tasteless side.

The woman rose from the piano and approached me extending her hand. “Mister Bolo! I never had a chance to thank you personally for your help in the incident last spring. Thank you so much!” Some terrorists had taken hostages at the ABS broadcast center. Thudd, Boomerang Girl and I had dealt with the situation and mostly through very good luck, no one had been hurt. I was kind of proud of that one. They’re making a movie about it. I’m played by Nicholas Cage.

“You are quite welcome Ms. Beaton. I felt like I was simply doing my job.” She was showing a *lot* of cleavage. I studiously held my gaze on her eyes.

“I would love to interview you on The Evening Show! Please call my assistant, Paula, and she’ll arrange it.”

Edelman stepped between us. “Angie, please! He hasn’t even said why he is here!”

“Thank you Mister Edelman. I just need to ask you a few questions.”

“Sure.” He looked over at Angelica. “Excuse us for a minute.”

“I thought we were going out to dinner!”

“We’ll go, we’ll go! Just give me a few minutes. Go powder your nose or something.”

Angelica and the maid left them alone.

“Now what can I do for you mister super-hero?”

I put on my most winning smile. “You sold shoes, didn’t you, Mister Edelman? That’s what you did up until six months ago.”

“Right you are! Taking home three-sixty a week! Oy! Try making ends meet on that!”

“But you had a lucky day!”

He nodded. “I have been very blessed.”

“The chances against you winning all those games at once are beyond astronomical!”

He sighed and looked at me with tired patience. “They proved several times over that *nobody* could cheat the lottery, not the world’s greatest gambler let alone some nobody of a shoe salesman.”

"I'm not calling you a cheat, Mister Edelman. Your win seems to be part of a disturbance in the laws of probability that centers on Flatbush I was wondering if anything strange happened to you around the time you won."

"That whole week is a blur! My life changed completely overnight! I don't remember anything strange at all except winning like that."

"I'm just trying to figure something out is all."

I was stumped. I was a battler, a swashbuckler. I'm great with martial arts, but I'm no master detective. I wasn't sure where to go from here.

Edelman walked me back out to the deck, but I stopped a second to "admire" the painting over the mantle. "You like that?" Edelman asked. "I had that commissioned from one of your first class Greenwich Village artists!" There was a brass title plate that said *Lissa F G.*

"Someone special?" I asked.

"Someone very special."

Edelman looked me in the eye. "I really admire young men like you, looking out for the whole world!" He pulled out a wad of cash from his breast pocket and peeled off two one-hundred dollar bills. He stuck one into the fire and lit a big cigar with it. He handed me the other. "A little something in appreciation for all you do." It was an absurd, cartoonish, ostentatious and, frankly, gross display. I hadn't gone to work at my day job for a few days, I took the money. So sue me.

I hadn't shown up at my daytime job for days. As you might imagine, I call in sick a lot. I work loading trucks at the port. It's easy work for me. I'm a big strong guy and it doesn't take a lot of my mental energy. Also, I don't get asked a lot of questions about the days I'm out. My boss and co-workers just assume I'm an irresponsible party boy. Nonetheless I have to make a living. I'm invisible here. The main protection I have from being recognized as Bolo is that all my records say I'm a year younger than I really am. I have Johnny Benjamin, one of my classmates from Ardley High who wanted to grow up to be a lawyer just like his dad to thank for that. His dad was a little on the shady side and so was Johnny and he was able to fix my birth certificate and social security no problem.

The manager told me there was a woman looking for me. I went outside to see and found a very pretty woman. She was dressed in sort of a hippie/gypsy kind of style only everything looked expensive. She was obviously Cohort. When little girls wish to be something when they grow up, a dancer, a model, a mommy, it's always a *beautiful* one. Sometimes that itself is the wish, just to be beautiful, but even if they want to be a doctor or a lawyer or the president, they also want beauty. "May I help you miss?"

She pointed to a tiara in her auburn hair. “It’s not ‘miss’. I am Princess Melissa.” Why was a princess looking for a guy who loads trucks? Princess Wanda had mentioned a Princess Melissa. Too coincidental she had to know who I was.

“Um, excuse me Your Highness. What can a humble dock worker do for you?”

She smiled prettily. “When do you find the time for sleep, Mr. Bolo? Swinging amongst the towers and righting wrongs all night, loading trucks all day. You must get quite worn out.”

My eyes bugged out and I held a shushing finger to my lips. “Hey! Keep it down! I get it. I’m not going to waste time asking how you know who I am and I’ll cut straight to why are you here?”

“I live in Flatbush and I heard you were conducting an investigation there. I’m here to offer what help I can give.”

“As I recall, you are the princess of White Plains.”

“I abdicated and decided to take up a different life.” I had never heard of someone who was Cohort simply dropping their vocation. The thing we all seem to have in common is that our destiny was writ in stone at the age of seven.

“That’s unusual to say the least.”

“I’m a bit of a special case.”

“We are *all* special cases. We are the very definition of special cases!”

“I know, but I’m just a little bit more so. I’m not just a princess. I’m a *fairy* princess and I decided to concentrate on my fairyness.”

I had heard of fairy princesses. They were considerably less common than ordinary princesses. Even most seven-year-olds kind of know that you can’t grow up to be a fairy or anything like that so there are few supernatural type beings amongst the Cohort. “You came to *Flatbush* to be a fairy?”

“I inherited my grand parent’s house there. Look, I can help you find the source of the improbabilities. Come to my place tonight.” She handed me her card and then burst into a shower of golden sparkles that dazzled my eyes and wasn’t there anymore. Bright lights floated before my eyes before my vision cleared enough to go back to work.

When I came back my manager had a knowing smile. “That was some babe! Nice rack too.”

“Hey! That’s my sister!” I lied.

“Sorry man, no offense!”

Back in Flatbush

The address on the card lead me to Marlborough road. It wasn't at all like Princess Wanda's place. It was a very ordinary looking house. I rang the bell and she opened the door. "Good evening, Mister Bolo." She said in a husky voice. What she was wearing was awfully revealing! A diaphanous glittery robe under which she was obviously naked. She turned to lead me inside and I saw the large pair of butterfly like wings growing from her shoulders.

"Hey! You're the girl in Edelman's painting!" There was a bright flash and a sharp crack! My muscles went rigid and then…

She must have used up a whole roll of duck tape to hold me to the chair. I was groggy as hell. I had no idea what had hit me until I looked up. Standing in the corner of the room was Taser Lad. He grinned smugly. "Damn, kid. You could have killed me!" I mumbled.

"He's not the one you want to talk to. I am." I looked to the voice to see Princess Melissa. She was now completely nude. Her hair was wild and she had a strange liquid fire in her eyes. She held a thin gold shaft with a pulsating star-like point of light at one end, a magic wand.

"You're naked!"

"Can't fool you!" She laughed. "Bare skin lets the magic flow! Don't you like what you see?" She fluttered her wings and rose from the floor.

She *was* startlingly beautiful, but quite full figured, broad hips and large breasts not sylph-like at all, definitely a plus size. More of an "Earth Mother" than most people would associate with a fairy.

It hit me like a ton of bricks! I gave a little laugh. "I should have guessed. 'fairy princess' my foot! You're a *fairy godmother*!"

"Very good! There is more to you than just brawn, Bolo." She hovered close to me and murmured "Too bad I won't be able to get to know you better." She smelled of forest and sex and….magic. She moved back and made a quick motion with the wand. My bonds burst into dust. She nodded toward Taser Lad. "The boy thought it was fun to tie you up, but I really don't need such primitive means to hold you."

It was true enough. I wanted to rise from the chair, but a force kept me seated. "What exactly do you have in mind?"

"I just cannot allow your investigation to continue if I am to go on serving people by making their dreams come true!"

"You're throwing everything out of whack! Reality is stressed enough by the existence of the Cohort without adding to the madness. You granting wishes could possibly undo all of creation!"

“I can’t stop doing what I do anymore than you can. That’s what it means to be Cohort, right? Anyhow, the transformation is already underway.”

“Transformation?” I now found I could get up from the chair, then I saw my hands and held them up to my face. My fingers were lengthening and a web of shiny, wet skin was starting to crawl up between them.

“Yes. I’m afraid that I have to turn you into a frog. I’m far too kind to simply kill you.”

“Oh thank you so much!” I said sarcastically. “Come on! Stop this!” My mouth felt funny. It was spreading wide and froggy. Suddenly my legs would no longer support me upright and I dropped into a crouch. My costume was becoming baggy as my body started to reduce in size.

“You’ll have a good life! I’ll make you a terrarium and give you plenty of files!” My mind was starting to erode toward the amphibian. Flies were actually sounding pretty ok!

Then something even stranger took place…

An opening in space itself, maybe time too, was there. Other types of dimensions entirely were involved and *He* was there in the room now. Tall, stern. Like a man, but no one would call him human. He was obviously a great deal more. I knew with absolute certainty that he was not merely a person with super powers, but a god. I saw him more with my mind than with my eyes. Golden armor, winged sandals and a winged helmet. The wings were living, not dead ornaments. I tried to say the word “Mercury”, but what came out was a thrumming croak.

He glared at me like a school teacher who had caught me chewing gum and suddenly I was completely human again. “It’s *Hermes* if you don’t mind!”

“What the…?”

The god turned his attention to Princess Melissa and said, “I’m very sorry, but ***no***.” and snapped his fingers. Her wings vanished and the glowing point on her wand went out. Her feet landed solidly on the floor.

Taser Lad seemed to have flipped a breaker. There were no sparks. “Home, lad.” He said, and the boy was gone. I was just this side of going completely mad. Even in this crazy world, things like this just don’t happen! “Deus ex machina!” I laughed.

Hermes turned to me. “This is no jest, human. The world is a machine and it takes very little to make its wheels turn awry. ‘Tis bad enough that the gods were compelled to allow your cohort exclusion from the rules, but it can only be allowed so far and no farther. From this moment forth none of you will have the power to change the workings of the world.”

He was gone.

I sat there on the floor stunned. The former fairy godmother just stared ahead blankly. "That was a god?!? That was a GOD!"

"Yes. I think I'll be revising my religious views." I was a little blank myself.

Melissa reached over her shoulders feeling for her absent wings. Her large breasts were just a little less gravity defying.

"Maybe you should put some clothes on, Princess Melissa."

She snapped out of it and looked down at herself. "I think I'm just plain Melissa now." She said in a wavering voice a trifle too high. She blushed and dashed out of the room.

Things didn't change that much. Everybody still had their vocations. Almost everybody. Melissa seems to have become a very ordinary woman, granted an extremely lovely one. She apologized profusely for trying to turn me into a frog and settled into a normal life in Flatbush. All the people she had made extraordinary, and it turned out there had been hundreds, were no longer extraordinary. The Duke's car, crown and robot vanished. They just accounted for too much of the gold supply. Edelman was still rich, but his luck had run out. He was such a poor manager he wouldn't be a billionaire for long. He had already sold off the incomplete tower. Some of the Cohort vanished completely. Maybe they violated probability too much. We'll never know.

One thing we did know was that there was a crisis ahead in government. In about seven years we were going to turn thirty-five. I don't know exactly how many of us wanted to grow up to be president, but I'll bet it's a lot.

The Gaon of Chozzerai

Back in the day whenever I heard that old silly question “where do all the lost socks go?” I would have a ready answer. “I got ‘em.” That was until I learned differently.

Pretty much since I struck out on my own…well cast out by my parents really after having acquired a very expensive education that I did nothing with, I have lived on the margins. Not once since I had been living on my own had I actually bought socks. Why should I when laundromats always had a ready supply of odd ones? Similarly my clothes sometimes came from the same place or from thrift shops. It was my policy to never spend more than five bucks on a pair of pants or three bucks on a shirt. It just seemed to me that you had to be some kind of sucker to pay more.

“Low and easy” is how I described the way I lived. I had a fifty dollar a week room in east Cambridge. Shared bathroom down the hall. I had a hotplate even though we were technically not supposed to cook in the rooms. A few days a week, I collect cans. It’s a little tough because I have to get up early to beat out the tiny Chinese lady with her shopping cart. My sole advantage is that me on bike is faster than her on foot, but she can carry more. Even so, those couple of days are enough to keep the rent paid. I do a few odd jobs both legit and otherwise. A few shifts of day labor gets the groceries and other expenses taken care of.

I do apply for the occasional real job but the questions of interviewers are usually both boring and intrusive. I figured that getting a job at a supermarket just sweeping up and taking out the trash would be no big deal. Of course when I fill out the education section of the application, they always ask. “You have a Ph.D.… in…pez-oodo-ecks-nology?

“Pseudoxenology.”

“Wazzat?”

“It is the study of false xenolites.”

"Ya don't say. I don't get a lot of Ph.D.s applying for the maintenance crew. Are you just going to up and leave as soon as you get something at a college or with the government?"

"Take a look at me. My days in academia are behind me. I just want to do a day's work for a day's pay. I'm keeping it simple these days."

"Well **Doctor** Mackanac,…"

"Mackan-AW."

"Eh?"

"Mack-an-aw. It's pronounced Mack-an-aw. Spelt with a 'c', spoke with an 'aw'. You don't need to call me doctor. In fact, just call me Travis."

He curled his lip ever so slightly, but I caught it. "Well, *Travis*, I don't know that you are the best fit for this position. I'll give you a call if things change."

I should start telling people I'm a high school dropout. I have reaped more burdens than rewards from my education. It drove a wedge between me and my family and has aroused nothing but derision in the academic and research communities. The only reason I have that degree is because I wanted to stay in school as long as possible. Perversely I chose pseudoxenology as a focus simply because it was such an arcane field of study and I learned only after I had presented my thesis that *no one* had previously been awarded a doctorate in this field. My advisor was the well known xenologist Baird Shumway who just assumed I knew. My dissertation was mostly doubletalk, and I still got the degree. My father was royally pissed when he learned that it would be very unlikely to get me a job of any kind. If the old bastard was still alive, he would laugh to see it had in fact *prevented* me from getting a job as a janitor.

Anyway, this is about lost socks, remember? I learned where they *really* go.

This guy lived in the room about four doors down from me. His name was Rocky, at least that's what everyone called him. He was an old guy who had done thirty years in Walpole for something he didn't want to talk about and, frankly, I probably didn't want to hear about it if it was bad enough to buy him thirty years. He worked at a car wash three days a week and the rest of the time he spent watching TV or down at Claytons where he would nurse a single beer for three hours and bum smokes. He liked to make deals, stupid little deals. He would trade trinkets with other people, stupid items of dubious worth. He would find an Audubon field guide to songbirds of southern Missouri in a free box somewhere and would trade it to someone for a well-used 1964 World's Fair souvenir ashtray. Whatever gets him through the day, I guess.

Anyway, Rocky always had a bunch of odd items in his room and I got to see most of them because I played cards with him in his room every once in a while. On the evening when this all started he was showing me a paperback copy of *Jungle Tales of Tarzan*.

"I actually got it autographed by Burroughs the same year I got out!" I did a bit of calculation. I didn't know a whole lot about the author of Tarzan, but I thought I knew that he had died within a decade of the end of World War II. I looked at the title page and sure enough there was a signature of *William S.* Burroughs. The thing about Rocky is that little things escape him. I could have pointed his error out, but he would have just not understood or argued me to death about it.

"Hey, will you look at that! You ought to be able to get a few bucks for this."

"You bet I will, brother!"

While he was gloating over his prize I spied something else in the cardboard box he pulled it out of, an obsidian black polished stone with an inscription carved into it. It was in some foreign alphabet. I plucked it up. "Whazzis, Rocky?"

Rocky squinted at the item. "I took that off of that whiney little fuck Eddie when he didn't pay me back two bucks he owed. Who knows where the hell he got it. Didn't help me any, the pawn shop wasn't interested."

I rolled it over in my hand. It was a fat disc, would have been a lens if it had been made of glass, but it was dense, black stone, like basalt but darker and harder. It had been buffed to a high polish. The two lines of glyphs that marked the surface didn't look primitive. They looked like they had been carved with a machine. "It's kind of nice." I remarked.

"Yeah? Tell ya what, gimme Eddie's two bucks and it's yours." I paid him, stuck the thing in my pocket and forgot about it.

I found it again two days later and pondered it some. I may spend some time with Rocky, but there are clear differences between him and me. He is utterly lacking in curiosity. His judgment of any item begins and ends with his estimate of its monetary worth. At the public library I was unable to find an exact match for the curvilinear letters until I realized that it was actually a more wiggly version of the Latin alphabet that was written right to left. The language seemed to have romance roots.

Please understand that I couldn't have figured out even this much if I had not previously examined hundreds of xenolites and had been schooled in recognizing their particular characteristics. I suppose that I had better get into that a bit, it's not a subject that a lot of people encounter every day. Like I told you, I'm a pseudoxenologist by training. Xenolites are a phenomenon

that arises from parallel field generators where the reality of our universe encounters another parallel universe, a “xenocontinuum”. The xenolite is an artifact that is cognate to an artifact of our world, but showing the characteristics of another universe with a differing history, sometimes even differing natural laws. Study of these objects is an esoteric pursuit, but important because they are our sole window into these parallel worlds.

My particular field of study is considerably more esoteric than even that. Pseudoxenology is the study of so-called *false* xenolites. The best way I can describe a false xenolite is to point out that malfunctions can occur in parallel field equipment. Overloads, imbalances, voids and the occurrence of pulsed wave banding, commonly called “stelching”, are all ubiquitous anomalies. These anomalies can, on rare occasions, lead to a transitional matrix void and nature, abhorring a vacuum as it does, hastens to insert a mass based on almost any fancy in the operator’s subconscious. The items that are precipitated by these existential hiccups are referred to as *false xenolites*. The forms these parasubstantive bodies take is wild and variant, frequently defying reason. There are exactly twenty-three of these objects known to exist. The first and most famous of these is the eternally vibrating doorknob. It is a perfectly ordinary brass doorknob bearing manufactures marks indicating that it was made in Illinois in the 1920’s. Since it appeared it has never ceased emitting a 74 cycle hum. There is no source of energy for this. The vibration takes place with complete disregard of the laws of thermodynamics. It has even been suggested that it should be destroyed for fear it might eventually set the entire world off kilter. I have held this object in my hand and it seems innocent enough.

There have been others that are not quite so spectacular. An apparent human turd that smells strongly of roses, a 78 rpm tango record that glows in the dark, a perfectly normal looking potato that in photographs appears to be a large strawberry and so on. What distinguishes these baffling objects is that they cannot be created by design under any circumstances; they are *always* the product of chance combined with inattention. The false xenolite must be produced by accident. That accident must include a subconscious vision by the operator. We know this as the “Alladin’s Lamp” effect. The experimenter’s inner self makes a secret wish and the multiverse answers it. Are you surprised that there was no job for someone devoted to the study of these things?

In any case, I was pretty sure that the object that Rocky took from Eddie was a xenolite. How Eddie got it was something that I would never learn. I was able to get an idea of what the inscription said or rather I had a few possible translations only a couple of which made marginal sense. “Throw it

to face" was one, "cast for escape/face" was another. I wasn't really able to get too far with that.

The xenology stuff was more than two decades behind me. I have to admit that I was surprised that it drew me back in again. I wanted to learn more about the stone. One of the guys that Rocky knew from Clayton's was a janitor at the Harvard science library and could get me into the stacks. They were sure to have a copy of the Dilmount Catalogue.

The guy was willing to do it for a case of beer and he said if anyone asked me, I'd better not mention his name. It took me a short time, but I finally found the weighty three volumes of the 2000 updated Catalogue of known Xenolitic Objects issued by the Dilmount Institute. Twenty-six thousand two-hundred and sixteen objects, some of them living, four of them human, are enumerated, described and mostly accompanied by photographs are entered in these tomes. They are arranged by number in order of discovery with a DC (Dilmount Catalogue) number, an X followed by six digits and possibly additional digits that indicate the location of the discovery. There is also an appendix enumerating twenty-three *false xenolites*, my particular specialty. It was all quite organized. Unfortunately, the object I had, if it was ever labeled that label was long lost. I had a few hours to go through all three volumes page by page praying that it had been catalogued and photographed. If it were a real xenolite, someone would likely pay well for its return.

I flipped through page after page. About two-thirds of the way through the second volume I saw it in a grainy black and white photo identified thusly.

X-009421-6
Inscribed polished stone
175.7 gm
recovered 6/10/1935 MIT
Dr. D. L. Edelman
Xenocontinuum of origin unknown

It wasn't a lot of information, but it was enough to legitimize my suspicion. The brevity of the entry made me think it had not been the subject of a great deal of study. The sub number attached indicated that it was one of a string of xenolite acquisitions in a short time and perhaps the least interesting of them. That in fact turned out to be the case. In the same session an entire newspaper (X-009421-8) came through. Finds like this are considered to be staggeringly valuable. The stone was nothing by comparison.

According to the index of names, this Edelman character disappears from the history of parallel studies about a month after this find. That didn't strike me as unusual. As likely as not he was a graduate student who had finished, or decided to discontinue his studies. It happens all the time. There was no notation concerning the present location of the object. At the time this edition of the catalogue was printed, it must have been presumed to still be in MIT's collection. That was bad news for me. If it had been noted as having been loaned, lost or misplaced, then a story of finding it at a yard sale or in a junk shop would hold water. If it had been merely stolen, I would probably not make anything but a small reward for returning it, but I ran the chance of being accused of its theft.

I was pissed off. The entire thing seemed like a waste of time. I pulled the stupid thing out of my pocket and glared at it in the palm of my hand. I had had about enough of this thing. With my typical reserve and maturity, I flung it at the cinderblock wall of the stack room hoping to break it into a hundred pieces.

What happened instead was a dim flash of pinkish light followed by something that looked like water ripples in the wall. The ripples subsided and I was looking into someplace else and it wasn't the office on the other side of the wall. On the floor was sort of a glittering path along the trajectory that I had tossed the stone. The stone itself was lying on it right where the wall once had been. I stepped over and picked it up and then took a better look through the portal that had opened. There was a dim gray sky overhead with no obvious point source of light. Rather the entire firmament seemed to exude a dim luminance. The light level was like early twilight.

Almost without thinking I stepped through the portal, which still rippled slightly at the edges. I touched the edge where wall faded to open space in a half transparent, half mirror reflective watery miasma. I pulled back quickly. The sensation was like a combination of a mild electric shock and being bitten by angry ants.

I was viewing a bland landscape, flat and dusty without trees or any other plants for that matter. There were a few stones strewn about. Due to the quality of the light they cast no shadows. Also there were a number of mounds. They didn't look like hills, more like heaps of debris of various colors, garbage maybe. In the distance, I guessed about a quarter mile, there was a group of buildings. I squinted my eyes to try and make them out a bit better in the low contrast light and took a few steps forward. I had actually walked about ten feet before I even wondered if it was a good idea. I turned around and looked back and saw no sign of the portal. "Fuck!" I yelped and ran back to the site where I thought it had been. I waved my hands around

trying to find it and shouted “Fuck!” again. “Oh my fucking God! How stupid can I be?!?”

I had no idea exactly how it had happened, but I knew *what* had happened. I had stepped into a xenocontinuum.

How long I stood there damning my stupidity is anyone’s guess. There was no sun in the sky, if indeed the gray vault above me really qualified as a “sky”. The steady dim light remained the same and I wore no watch to contradict it with. Eventually I started to make my way toward the group of structures in the distance.

As I walked I encountered a few of the mounds I had seen from a distance. The first of them was a pile of socks of all colors about ten feet high. A little farther on I found a pile of wedding and engagement rings six feet high. It must have been a few of tons of gold and diamonds. I could have filled my pockets with them and lived for years by pawning one every week. I resolved to remember where they were, but I was pretty sure there were no hockshops here.

The little assembly of buildings was not quite what I would call a town. There were two stone buildings that looked like banks or museums or city-halls, that sort of Greek temple kind of style sort of thing. There was also a two story wood frame house painted white. It just stood there on the dirt. No lawn, no fence. Beside it was another mound that was entirely canned goods, mostly without labels. Beside the mound of cans was a guy with a wheelbarrow who was loading it up. I decided to introduce myself.

“Hey, man!” I called as I approached. The guy jerked as if he had been stung and whipped around to face me. He had sort of the look of a dirt-poor medieval peasant only he was wearing more or less modern clothes. He had what I thought was a kilt of some sort, but on closer examination I realized it was the lower part of a terry-cloth bathrobe sticking out from under a brownish 1930’s style suit jacket. On his feet were mismatched sneakers. On his head was a backwards baseball cap. He was unshaven, but the hair on his face didn’t really qualify as a beard either. His demeanor was both slightly frightened and shifty at the same time. Although he looked skinny and weak, I decided not to get within arms length of him. You never know. “Do you know what this place is?”

He cocked his head and his eyes shifted right and left as if he was making sure he was unobserved. “Yeah, sure. I know what this place is. Why wouldn’t I, huh?” His accent was the Brooklynese of a thirties movie comic relief character.

“You mind telling me?”

“Tellin’ you what?”

"Where I am."

"You're right there!"

I took a deep breath. "Who's in charge around here? The main guy, the head honcho?"

"Ya mean the *Gaon*?"

"Maybe. Is he the boss?"

"Yeah, yeah. He's the boss. What'cha want him for?"

"I'm thinking he might give me a straight answer."

The guy threw his hands out. "Ya think I ain't straight? Ya got some nerve!"

"Can you just tell me where to find him please?"

He jerked his thumb at the house next to us. "Right dere. Good luck to ya brudder!" He picked up the wheelbarrow and headed off toward a collection of shanties in the distance.

I went over to the door of the house. It had no foundation looking like it had just been dropped there as if it was a toy house rendered full sized. I knocked. No answer. I knocked again and this time heard movement inside. I called out "Hello! Is anyone there?"

The door was flung open and I found myself nose to nose with a guy wearing coke-bottle glasses. He had a pointed nose and slicked back brown hair. "What?!?" He snapped. He pulled up short, looked startled and stepped back. "Please forgive me, I thought you were a Schmendrick!"

"We just met! That's a bit judgmental."

He seemed perplexed. "What? Nevermind, come in, come in, come in!" He beckoned me impatiently to enter. The man was tall and lean, but not scrawny like the guy I met outside. The inside of the house was furnished with various second hand pieces. Nothing matched but it wasn't shabby either. There was no television, phone, radio or computer in evidence nor did there seem to be electric power. The house was lit with sconces on the walls that emitted a steady yellow-orange glow. I looked inside one and saw that it had a brilliantly glowing stone held in a screw clamp. How it worked, I didn't know.

"So", I asked, "are you the um, Gaon?"

"The Schmendricks call me that."

"You thought I was a Schmendrick."

"You're not, I hope. The Schmendricks are all still here because they couldn't think to pick up the key."

"What?"

"The *Key*! The way into this furshlugginer place!"

Ah-ha! I thought to myself. I was thinking that I might do well to play dumb.

"The key?"

"The key you used to get here!"

I thought fast. "Hey, I didn't use a key. I was assuming that I was dead and this was the afterlife."

"Afterlife! You better hope not! This is no heaven! How did you get here?"

"Um, I was taking a walk in the park, I stopped to just pitch a few rocks and I saw a shining path. I followed it and here I am."

"Feh! You're another Schmendrick alright." He rolled his eyes briefly upward. " Why don't they pick up the key, ever? Alright, alright. I'm the Gaon, I'm in charge around here, but my only rule is that you don't bother me! There is plenty of everything here, you'll do fine. Everything lost by anyone ends up here. Why, don't ask me. There is clothing, there is food, there is even money, gold and jewels for all the good they will do you here."

"Where is 'here'?"

"I have a bunch of names for this little world, not a one of them nice. Mostly I call it Chozzerai after its only natural resource."

"Chozzerai?"

"It means 'crap', Schmendrick. Welcome to the land of crap. Now, if you don't mind, I have many things to be doing."

"Wait a minute! How do I get out of here?"

"You don't. Not without the key. If you had that you could come and go as you please. Those piles of lost stuff would be worth something." Yes they would be. If I played my cards right I could be kissing my bottom feeder life goodbye.

"What's the key?"

"Schmuck! You must have had it in your hand! You throw it against a wall and the way opens up. If you were not such a Schmendrick, you would have picked it up and brought it with you. It could get you out the same way. It also opens the museum and the library, but you *are* a Schmendrick and you didn't, so please, you need to be getting out of my house now!"

"Alright, alright. I'm going, but can I come back if I have more questions?"

"So what am I, the answer man? Yes, yes you can come back, but don't be making me crazy. Now go." He hustled me out and slammed the door.

So now what? I knew how to go home, but I had to play it smart or this gaon guy will figure out I have the key. I still didn't know what his story was, but I had to just avoid him as much as possible and let him think I'm

just another Schmendrick. That pile of gold and diamond rings was definitely on my mind.

I looked around and saw the pile of cans. What the hell, I could eat. I went over to it and scanned around for one with a label. A lot of them were dog food. I finally found a can of baked beans. Of course, no can opener. I went back and knocked on the door again. The Gaon opened up. “What now?”

“Do you have a can opener I could borrow?”

He palmed his face and groaned. He looked up and said “Look, you are going to have to get better at schmendricking than that. About a mile over that way is a three-story pile of kitchen utensils. Now scram!” He slammed the door.

That was a long walk for a can opener. On the way I stopped at a pile of cash of all nations. I sorted out a few hundred bucks American. There were also coins. I thought about digging for some Krugerands or Canadian maple leaf coins, but decided there would be time enough for that later. I also found a pile of water bottles, most of them half used, but a little digging got me a couple of unopened ones. I finally found the pile of kitchen gadgets, which was the biggest of the piles I had seen yet. I found a can opener and a fork, and then I got a big kitchen knife in case I ran into trouble.

I found the village of the Schmendricks shortly after I ate. There weren’t a lot of these guys, a dozen or so, all male. It was a collection of shanties made from whatever is at hand with varying amounts of skill. I had no evidence that there was any weather in Chozzerai, so they must have been mostly for privacy and personal space. I figured if I was going to be a Schmendrick, I probably ought to have one. The guy I had seen with the wheelbarrow was nearby so I went up to him. “Hey buddy, is it o.k. if I build a house here?”

“Waddam I, yer mudder? Do waddever ya want.”

I spent some time there. I was going to need a base of operations. I built myself a little Schmendrick house using lost cell phones as bricks held together with lost containers of glue. It was a process that took far longer than I at first thought it would. I really knew nothing about laying bricks, particularly when they took the form of thousands of oddly-shaped cell phones.

One of the Schmendricks, Joe by name, showed me where I could get something they called “glow stones”. They were the glowing rocks that I saw in the Gaon’s house. They came from a place right next to the end of the world.

It turns out that this Chozzerai place isn’t very big. The Schmendricks told me it was about fifty square miles and the area where the Gaon and most of

the Schmendricks lived was about five miles from one of the edges. The "End of the World" is what they called the edge. The physical laws of the place break down there. Everything is normal, for this place that is, until you are about a hundred yards away from it. Then the ground gets rippled like waves in water but it's still solid. As you get closer there are deep cracks and the glow stones are in those cracks. If you go farther than that everything turns an even gray like a dense fog almost. If you walk into it, you find yourself walking right out the way you came without even feeling yourself turn around. It feels weird as shit, like you are walking through yourself or something. I tried it once and that was all I needed.

The glow stones were already broken up into small pieces in the cracks and that's a good thing because they are harder than anything you can find to break 'em with. The Schmendricks claimed they were harder than diamonds. You could collect them with your hands. They were only slightly warm even though they gave off this glowing coal type of light. All you had to do to put a lamp together was to make some kind of a bracket to hold one and there you go. This was how everyone lit the inside of their houses. The glow stones didn't give off enough heat to cook with and the Schmendricks ate their food mostly cold out of the can. In spite of the fact that there was no shortage of disposable lighters, they didn't start fires very often because smoke doesn't go away. It will hang around for days because there is no wind and the top of the "sky" is pretty low.

The only way I could mark time was by how often I got tired and slept. By my calculations I had been there ten days. My little phone brick shanty was finished complete with interior lighting and a comfy bed made of lost socks. I finally closed the door and promptly threw the key against the wall. The path opened up on the other side was part of Massachusetts Avenue near Central Square in the middle of the night. I picked up the key and walked through looking out for cars as I went. It must have been really early morning. I walked up to Central and into the Dunkin Donuts. The clock on the wall said quarter after four AM. I got a coffee and a bagel sandwich and sat down. Someone had left a Herald at the table and I saw that nine days had passed. I went home and slept in my own bed for a few hours.

I got up around ten and was heading out when someone knocked on my door. It was Rocky. "Where in hell have you been? The manager is looking for the rent. He said he was going to put your shit on the sidewalk tomorrow if you didn't show."

"Family emergency. I had to leave town. I'll give Stan his money before I go out."

I found the manager and paid him a month in advance, so he was happy then I headed for the hardware store. I also went to the army & navy surplus. Once I had my supplies I went to the car park building behind the supermarket and scanned around until I spotted a car that would be easy to hotwire. Toss the key, go pick it up, drive through and I was in.

This time I was farther from the Gaon's place, almost a mile away so hopefully no one would spot me driving around. There were several piles of cash I had spotted on my last visit. I went to the farthest one and filled up two surplus duffel bags. From a pile of jewelry I filled up a couple of small canvas back packs.

Getting back in a place where it was safe to take the car took a bit of thinking. I finally decided to drive back to my own little shanty. I waited until I thought it would be quiet early morning and then went to the Schmendrick village. A few Schmendricks saw me as I got out of the car, threw and picked up the key and got back in and drove through. I had a pile of cash and other goodies, but the beans had been spilt. I took the bags home and then parked the car in downtown Boston and took the T home.

I could have left well enough alone, but I had a feeling that the real mother load was in the two Greek temple buildings. Knowing about them just made me restless. I took my time. I had plenty of money. I took the small bills and changed them for bigger ones and then got a safe deposit box. I had a bit less than a hundred grand so I'd be good for a while. I started getting rid of the jewelry using various of the gold buyers that advertise on TV. Those guys are ready made fences. They don't care where anything came from and I could afford to just get weight on the stuff. I got a post office box to receive the checks. No need to make the neighbors wonder why I was getting so much mail.

The next part was going to take some discretion. The next time I went into this Chozzerai place the Gaon and the Schmendricks would know what I was up to and that I had the key. It seemed like a bit of insurance was in order. I had never even held a gun in my hand, not ever. I sure as hell didn't know where to get one, but I was pretty sure I ought to have one. Unsurprisingly Rocky knew a guy.

Every one of those people in that little pocket universe were likely to do anything they can to get the key from me. I would just have to tell them that I'm sorry. I considered allowing them all to leave, but I realized that The Gaon and a dozen Schmendricks more or less would be too many people that could blow this deal for me.

I took a little time to get ready, but not too much. I didn't want the people on the other side to get organized. I wasn't very worried, except for

the Gaon, they didn't seem like organized types. I wasn't even sure why the Gaon was seen as being in charge. There was no evidence that he either did anything to or for the Schmendricks. I got a used van of my own. There was no point in complicating matters by using stolen vehicles if I didn't have to. I also got a watch. I debated if I should get help and decided against it. More than one person is too many to keep a secret. If I played this thing right, I could get these guys working for me.

I went through at a garden wall on Beacon Street in Somerville and ended up a mile or so from the Schmendrick village. No one was nearby and I probably went unseen. I drove a wide arc keeping my distance past piles of iPods, earrings, library books, homework, train tickets, spectacles, postage stamps and of course socks, many huge piles of socks.

Finally I came up behind the Gaon's house. There was only one window on that side and I was gambling that he wasn't looking out of it at the moment. My idea was to zip past and get into one of the buildings before he knew what was going on. I went past and he didn't come out of the house so I stopped in front of the building he had called the Library and ran up the steps. As I reached the top, I heard "Hey!" from behind me.

The Gaon was running out from behind a pile of wallets as he called to me. I ignored him and turned my attention to the door. I thought maybe I was going to have to throw the key against it, but there was actually a depression in it the exact size of the key. I fitted it in and the door clicked open. I plucked out the key, quickly entered and shut it behind me. Two seconds later I heard pounding and the Gaon calling. "Open up you schnorrer! You schmuck! You gonif!" I let him carry on as much as he wanted. He wasn't going to get through the Library's massive door.

The inside of the place was opulent with polished wood and brass trim on everything. There were books, millions of them on shelves that reached to the high domed ceiling. Other rooms opened off of the central one each labeled in the same language that appeared on the key. They were film and recording archives and another for sheet music. There was a room for paintings and sculpture and a room devoted to the collection of the great Library of Alexandria filled with scrolls in Greek, Egyptian and Persian. This was the Library of Lost Knowledge. I noted as I perused some of the books that they were all works lost to history, *The History of the World* by Berossus, several plays by Shakespear that no one had ever heard of, works by Socrates, most of the paintings of Vermeer and DaVinci and the lost opera of Scott Joplin. As well there were imaginary works that had never really existed but somehow found solidity in this place. *The King in Yellow* by Castaigne, *The Pension Grillparzer* by T.S. Garp, *Life* by Unspiek Baron

Bodissey, *A First Encyclopaedia of Tlön*, The *Necronomicon* by Abdul Alhazared, *An Oral History of the Contemporary World* by Joe Gould, *The Hitchiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* by Friedrich von Junzt, *Upon the Distinction Between the Ashes of the Various Tobaccos*, by Sherlock Holmes and all nineteen volumes of *Hansard's Guide to Refreshing Sleep* to name a few. It would take a thousand scholars a thousand years to assess its content.

As magnificent as the place was, I realized that I should have gone to the museum first. There was little there that I would have been able to load into the van and take back across to make into quick cash.

The Gaon had stopped pounding on the door. I was guessing that he had gone to the Schmendricks for help. I decided to try and dash across to the museum. The door wouldn't open until I discovered that the key was required for exit as well as entry. I carefully stuck my head out of the door and saw that no one was around and then ran down the stairs. I saw that the van hadn't been tampered with so I continued across to the museum.

Above the heavy bronze door were more of the strange glyphs that I had now become more adept at translating. They read "The Museum of Ultimate Power". This sounded a bit more promising. On either side of the massive marble stairway stood bronze statues, Behemoth on the left and Leviathan on the right, both in poses of aroused menace. I spent only a scant few seconds looking at them as I ran up to the door and placed the key into the depression and the doors swung open on their own. There was a rotunda with a short thick pedestal in the center. Upon it sat a golden chest surmounted by gold angels with outstretched wings, the Ark of the Covenant. I stepped forward for a better look and heard the doors close behind me.

As I wandered through the galleries, I saw the most amazing things. In a long glass case was Excalibur gleaming with power and potency. Under a glass bell jar was Green Lantern's ring and power battery, under another the Philosopher's Stone and still another enclosed the One Ring of Middle Earth. Alladin's Lamp was in a case in one corner. One pedestal held a machine that generated a powerful magnetic field that suspended a single drop of the Universal Solvent weightlessly inside of an evacuated transparent tube. The Holy Grail was on a dusty shelf on one wall right beside the Eye of Agamotto. The Urim and Thummim had their own case illuminated with a glow stone lamp. In another case sat the shamir stone in a wool padded lead box. Inscribed on a black stone tablet was the Anti-Life Equation and in a case nearby was the Cosmic Cube. Another glass dome covered a piece of the Fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. A test tube held a

sample of Ice-9 and in the same case were to be seen samples of Kryptonite, Unobtainium, Scrith, Cavorite and Doctor Pipt's Powder of Life.

Another shelf held a can of Popeye's special spinach, the pipe of J.R. "Bob" Dobbs and the lollypop of Herbie, the Fat Fury. Separate pedestals held Felix the Cat's Bag of Tricks and The Phantom Zone projector. The strange Subtle Knife was in a case of its own as was the spear of Longinus. The Ultimate Nullifier and a crackling Thunderbolt of Zeus had their places as did The Great Book of OZ. There were dozens of doomsday devices from both real and imagined worlds and there were also devices of powerful creation like the mysterious Clavius Monolith and the Genesis Device. The Cosmic Egg was held in its own little pocket of space-time with a window through it could be viewed, its one-eyed tadpoles of Yin and Yang dancing forever in a circle. There was a whole hall devoted to Time Machines and another to perpetual motion!

It was dizzying to be surrounded by these items, any one of which could make me a king. Some of them could make me a god!

Behind me I heard a metallic click.

I whirled around and reached for my gun, but I found myself facing the Gaon with a gun of his own pointed at my heart while I was still trying to get mine out. "You really *are* a Schmendrick. You left the key in the door. Drop the gun."

I pulled the pistol out of my belt and dropped it on the floor. "Where'd you get that anyway?"

"You *nudnik*! You think no one loses a gun ever?"

He marched me back toward the door and motioned for me to sit on one of the marble benches. "Now what?" I asked.

"Now you tell me your story. The average Schmendrick never got into the museum or the Library."

"Stop calling me that, man. You're every bit as much a Schmendrick as I am!"

"Whatever you say. What do you want me to call you?"

"Travis Mackanac is my name. What about you, did your mother name you 'the Gaon'?"

"One of the Schmendricks called me that. It means 'genius'. He was being sarcastic. I'm Daniel Edelman."

"D.L. Edelman! You discovered the xenolite! The Key."

He raised his eyebrow. "So you know a little something about xenolites!"

"I have a Ph.D. in pseudoxenology."

“I am impressed! In my day too little was known about false xenolites for anyone to make it the focus of their life’s work.”

I gave a short laugh. “Not in my day either.”

“Well, mister Peseudoxenologist, you have stumbled upon the most important discovery in your field! ***This whole world is a false xenolite*** created by me on the tenth of June, nineteen thirty-five and I was foolish enough to trap myself here that same year.”

“You ought to be a lot older, that was seventy-six years ago.”

He shook his head. “Oy gevalt! I didn’t know it had been quite that long. There are different laws of nature here. None of us have gotten any older. You should have plenty of time to study the Museum and the Library.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You came here to take things and you were going to leave us here, perhaps kill some of us if we tried to stop you. I am thinking that you are not such a very good man, doctor Mackanac.”

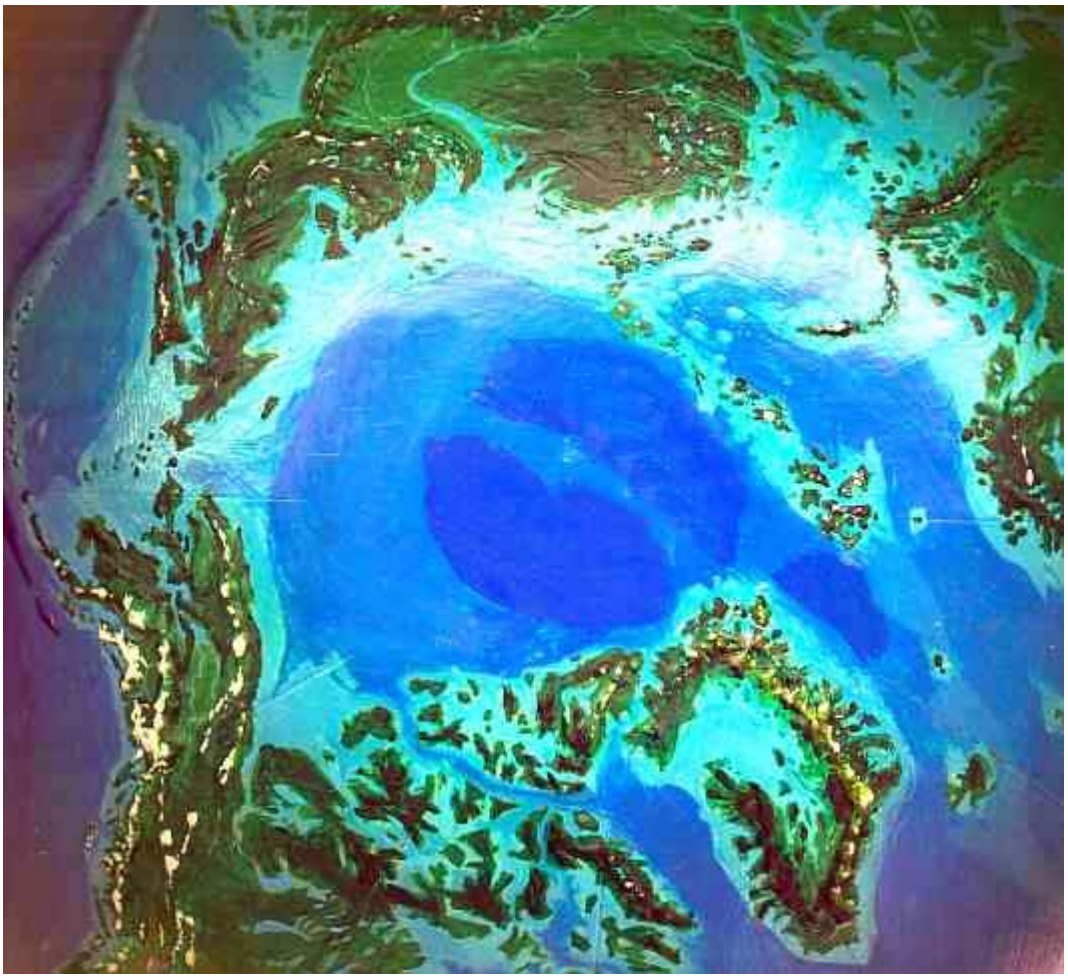
“Whatever.”

“‘Whatever’, he says. It would not be so good for the world if you were to bring things from the Museum back with you. I have not seen our world in a long time, but I think perhaps it has troubles enough without that. Without *you* as well, maybe.”

In the Museum there was a powerful robot that looked like it came out of a thirties science fiction pulp. Edelman ordered it to hold me by the wrist for one hour. He propped open the doors of the Library and the Museum and then piled the Schmendricks and himself, all fourteen of them, into the van, tossed the key, picked it up and drove out of Chozzerai.

The battery in my watch hasn’t died yet. I have been here for six years so far. After the robot let me go, it would take orders from me, so I had it tear off the doors of the Museum and Library so there wouldn’t be any accidents. None of the devices in the Museum will open a way home for me. I guess one of the laws of this place is that the Key and only the Key provides access.

I keep hoping that Edelman will take pity on me and let me out. Certainly there could be worse prisons. Chances are that Edelman will always believe that I shouldn’t be let out. He will have to grow old and die and someone else will find and finally use the Key. I hope that person won’t be the kind of *Schmendrick* that forgets to pick it back up.



A Day on the Sea of Darkness

Gael stepped out of the cabin, still unsteady having barely acquired “sea legs” and shielding his eyes from the sun as he nodded to the captain. “It’s just some poor joke that they call this place the Sea of Darkness! I haven’t

gotten decent sleep in…agh, I don't even know how long since the bloody sun never sets!"

Nial Stoerm was ever patient with his passengers, but the explanation was one he had made so many times that he might have spoken it in his sleep. "A day is a year at these latitudes. Six months of day and six of night. During those months of night masses of sea-ice can form making sailing this sea treacherous indeed. It is the final darkness that awaits the unwary for which we sailors name this sea. Even at night this sea isn't black for the stars turn overhead and the sky burns with the cool night fire."

Gael snorted looking downward at Stoerm for he was two heads taller. "That's very colorful, captain, but I'm sure that I shall be in far better shape to appreciate the local lore once I have had a cup or three of coffee. Is the cook in the galley?"

"If not I'll be docking his pay."

"Excellent! Well then a good morning to you, captain…or whatever bloody hour it might be."

As Gael entered the galley, he stopped briefly to consult the wall panel. It was the twelfth day of June, twenty-five sixty-seven, ten twenty-two AM. The sky was clear, current temperature sixteen degrees centigrade with a predicted high of nineteen. The ship was at seventy-nine degrees north latitude thirty kilometers west of the Ellsmere coast and currently under the jurisdiction of the laws of Nunavut. The magnetic pole was dead ahead twenty eight kilometers and they would pass over it in forty minutes or so. The geographic pole was still several days ahead. He sighed. It had already been two weeks since he had left Yellowknife. He had disliked travel before, but on this trip he had come to despise it. The train was bad enough, but he absolutely hated travel by sea. No matter what, he never felt right inside aboard a boat. It would be yet another two weeks before they reached the Anzhu islands. He had no choice; traveling by anything but a sail ship was prohibitively expensive and unnecessary according to the Board. He had watched in envy as an airship passed overhead the previous day. The captain had rung the ship's bell in greeting and it had replied with its deep bass whistle as it glided toward the northern horizon. Its destination was Yakutsk where it would be in a day.

The cook gave him some grits and a slice of goose breast and a welcome cup of strong coffee. He was savoring the breakfast and starting to feel more human when Aoki san entered the galley with his two wives. Gael was fascinated by the Japanese in general for their complex culture that was nearly incomprehensible to westerners. This situation had gotten worse rather than better over the centuries since Japan had been forcibly "opened"

to the world. The infusion of western ideas into their medieval, but ingenious civilization had proven to be an explosive mix. In six hundred years it had never stopped adding layer upon layer of cultural features both subtle and outrageous. Aoki Hiro was quite conservative by modern Japanese standards. He wore no makeup in the day time and didn't use slang from six different eras in the same sentence. He had the traditional two wives, one human, one robot. The human wife was named Miho, a tall blond who looked only barely Japanese. The robot was named Mighty Yoko Sexy and looked quite human in most respects save for her glowing green eyes. Her hourglass curves certainly looked human enough and were well displayed in an almost completely transparent negligee and a pair of high heels that might in fact have been a part of her. She was shorter and more Asian looking than Miho. On her head she wore a coronet that sported a pair of pink rabbit ears. According to Aoki san, she had super human strength and the ability to fly, but Gael had never seen either demonstrated.

Gael called to them. "Aoki san! Ladies! Will you join me?"

Aoki nodded and smiled pleasantly as he and the two women approached the table. "It is a fine morning, is it not Mr. Wynn?"

"Morning!" Scoffed Gael. "I can't tell one time of day from another in these parts! I certainly hope that you have been getting better sleep than I have." The Aokis sat down across from him with Hiro in the middle and one woman to either side. Aoki san ordered a breakfast similar to Gael's for all three of them. Mighty Yoko did indeed eat normal food although her body digested it in quite a different manner from that of a human.

Aoki said, "You seem to be getting used to being at sea."

"Used to it, Aoki san, but I have yet to learn to love it."

"Not like the sea at home." put in Miho. "Kyokuchi no umi is mondo ring-a-ding! Gendo maxi power shine!" She spoke in American, but it might as well have been Japanese for all that Gael could understand it. He simply smiled and nodded as he did at almost everything that Miho said.

Gael looked over at Mighty Yoko consciously avoiding looking at her breasts although he was uncertain why. "I suppose that sea travel causes you no discomfort."

She pointed her glowing eyes in his direction. "My equilibrium is undisturbed by the motion of the waves. I find the sea air refreshing on my skin." Her speaking voice was fluid, almost musical.

"Refreshing on your skin?"

Mighty Yoko Sexy smiled displaying perfect white teeth. "Westerners frequently are surprised that I possess advanced tactile sensation. It is what I was made for. How could I properly caress my husband's most sensitive

parts, or react to his intimate touch and bring forth his most potent ejaculation if I…"

Gael was blushing a deep red before Aoki san noticed and stopped his wife. "Mighty Yoko Sexy! That is quite enough! You are making Mister Wynn uncomfortable!"

Gathering his composure, Gael said, "She merely caught me by surprise, sir. No offense is taken."

Aoki said "I understand that persons of your faith do not use sex robots."

"My *discipline,* Aoki san. Magistra Ritus Alchemy is not a religion. Members of my order do not marry and typically do not consort with women, although I think that robots may not count."

"Really! Well, you must try Mighty Yoko then!"

"Yay!" squealed Miho, "She will jump you hyper-sexy-wow! Kyodai squirt! Kanojo wa anata ga kanso su-deshou! You won't be man for ten days after!"

Gael was blushing again. "Ahem. While I thank you for your kind offer, this is not a pleasure trip for me and I must concentrate on my task." Mercifully for Gael, the meal ended soon and the Aokis took their leave.

As she left the table, Mighty Yoko leaned close and softly said to him, "If you change your mind, I will get much enjoyment out of showing you how much sensation I can share." When the robot leaned close, the sexual scent she exuded, artificial though it may have been, was strong and arousing. Gael had to sit and have two more cups of coffee before his erection subsided enough for him to rise and return to his cabin.

On the small desk in his cabin Gael had four books laid out. They were printed codices made from real paper. Usually if one were to see a book of this sort it would be centuries old, but these were modern printings. The Magistra Ritus Alchemists preferred them over display pads and the Order printed them at great expense. A graduate in the discipline would spend half the cost of his education on the essential eleven books and they would remain his most valuable possession throughout his life. For Gael Wynn, traveling with some of these books by sea was a great risk, but he would need them when he reached the isle of the Osartifex.

Gael was already thirty-eight years old and had yet to compose his first major thesis. Yes, the preliminaries had been released and approved by the community although few had much hope for him seeing it through. The entire history of the Order had been the revival of lost ways of knowing. Their claim before the skeptical public was that the Order was both post religious and post scientific, but several elements of the discipline were very ancient indeed. The Order was not concerned with transmuting base metals

to gold. Modern industry was perfectly capable of that parlor trick anyway. Even in ancient alchemy, mere gold was not the goal so much as the purification of the spirit, the revelation of self that comes through uncovering the secrets of nature.

Magistra Ritus came into being in the twentieth century, but was an underground movement until the mid twenty-first when several adepts attempted to seize power in part of the then crumbling United States. They gained power based on their claims that they could stop the advancing sea. Other members of the Order throughout the world went public to denounce those claims as, at best, overstated. For thirteen years they ruled southern New Jersey until it was finally absorbed by the emerging Eastern Republic from which they were deported to the political successor to the USA which contained none of the original thirteen states. It was here that the Order came to maturity and became an influence on modern thought in the era when coastlines around the world were altering and power centers were shifting away from the great costal cities, many of which vanished completely in those times.

In his cabin, Gael referred to the section of codex number four of the Magistra Ritus known as the Lexicon of High Degree Masters. The references were not to particular people, but to elevated roles attained by certain adepts from time to time. Not all of those positions may be filled in any given century. For instance there had been no Lightmage since the early twenty-two hundreds. No one knew of anyone becoming Storm Master since late classical times. Lawgivers emerge with some frequency and are, unfortunately, often fraudulent. Outside of the discipline, a Lawgiver is sometimes called the Magistra Ritus pope because it is the de facto highest position in the order. Anyone claiming that position these days must face a lengthy examination by the Board of High Adepts before they are accepted. There is a current Lawgiver, Carlos Joran, and he is very restrained having only altered policy of the order twice in the forty years he has held the position.

Gael had become aware that a young adept from Russia had taken on the mantle of the Osartifex. If true it was quite an event. So far as anyone in the order knew, the last Osartifex lived in the early twentieth century in central Africa. According to the Lexicon, an Osartifex can assemble bones, even bones from different creatures, and create a living entity upon them. Many ancient monsters have been ascribed to the work of Osartifexae.

Gael Wynn didn’t know the name of this new young Osartifex and in fact the Board had paid for his trip to visit and gather information. Of course, they weren’t so interested that they would pay for first class travel.

Gael spent some hours making notes and studying charts. He had to be well prepared. Meeting with the Osartifex was to be the basis of his own thesis.

He requested luncheon in his cabin via the panel which was brought by a service robot. Soup, bread and tea. The soup was quite good although he was not certain of its contents. He thought the meat might be squid. Whatever it was it satisfied nicely.

Finding that his stomach was more settled than usual, Gael decided to take a walk around the deck.

A pod of humpback whales were breaching about two hundred meters away with their robot escort ship. Japan had never been convinced to cease whaling even though the high intelligence and sophistication of cetaceans had been well known for centuries. The whales, pretty much all species, have been at war with Japan for hundreds of years. The final solution to the problem was to arm the whales. It was they who now did the majority of marine exploration for resources and they trade that information for the escort ships and access to the world data bank. The heavily armed ships could take out most whalers without difficulty. Once in a while a whale would be taken, but the escorts did much to even the odds.

Gael's lanky one point eight meter frame cast a shadow almost the entire length of the deck from the low sun. A man of his height might have been imposing, but at a mere eighty-five kilos he didn't seem substantial enough. The disciplines of the order had of course trained him to perfect physical conditioning, but he did not show the typical musculature of most Magistra Ritus practitioners, at least not when fully clothed.

His life at the institute in Yellowknife had been peacefull, diciplined and focused. Here at sea he had hoped that he might retain some of his cloistered isolation and be undistracted as he prepaired his thesis. The never setting sun, the captain's stories, frolicing whales and Mighty Yoko's breasts all served to disrupt that aspiration. Returning to his cabin he devoted the rest of his day to meditation until he was signaled for dinner.

Two more days had passed and Gael was sleeping peacefully when the ship's bell rang out. The wall panel showed the time as two-fifteen AM. Was there a fire? He wondered as he sat up blinking. Pulling on a robe he stumbled into the daylight on the deck. Standing before him wearing a huge grin and absolutely nothing else was Aoki Hiro.

"Mister Wynn!" he exclaimed, "We are crossing the pole! You must take a dip in the ocean! It is a tradition of the sea!"

"What?" Said Gael, perhaps a bit more rudely than strictly necessary. He had heard of these traditions. Line crossings of the Equator had been

celebrated for as long as sailors had crossed the great oceans and the tradition of crossing the pole had existed for the three centuries that the polar sea had been free of ice. If men of his discipline knew anything, it was that ancient traditions must be honored. Gael relaxed and smiled. “You are right Aoki san! I suppose I must.”

They walked around to the other side of the deck where they were met by other passengers equally as nude as Aoki including the slender (and much tattooed) Miho and the bountifully proportioned Mighty Yoko Sexy on whom he did his best to avoid letting his eyes linger. This was the first time he was meeting many of his fellow passengers, sixteen in all. Several were already over the side of the stopped ship splashing in the chilly water, the Fiorellis, a retired couple from Origonia and the young Dormont family of Toronto with their three rambunctious boys. Within a minute, he and the Aokis were in the cool water splashing and laughing. The crew watched carefully making sure that no passenger strayed too far. Later on board, the captain presented each of them with a cheaply pressed Alluminum medal making them official “Polar Mariners” after which they all retired to the galley to warm up with a spot of brandy while Captain Storem regaild them with anecdotes of strange ports on the Sea of Darkness. It was six o’clock before Gael found his way back to bed.

I didn’t matter if Gael slept or woke, the sun was always a few degrees above the horizon and he found himself sleeping at more random intervals as they moved neared the Anzhus. His only major human contact was lunching with the Aokis, otherwise he kept himself busy with his books and charts in preperation for vetting the Osartifex.

Gael had been in daily contact with the Anzhu government regarding the circumstances of his visit and also trying to arrange acomodations at the port “city” of Morskygorod. They were quite protective of the island compound of the Osartifex and very suspicious of foriegners visiting him. There were no local representitives of the Order to aid him in any of this and he was experiencing difficulties as a result. According to captain Storem, most business in Anzhu was conducted with bribes and through invoking connections. This could prove problematic for a foreigner seeking a reasonable price for almost anything. The captain had been able to get Gael’s entry tarrif reduced by half, but the hotel was still requiring an exorbitant fee for a small room. While the Order required no particular rejection of wealth, Gael was still getting by on a basic initiate’s stipend until he had completed and published a dissertation. That fact made it essential that he find lodging that could be covered by his grant. He appealed

to the Captain as someone familiar with the local customs for advice. “One could benefit by having a go-between in this country.” He said. “Perhaps I know the right person for the job.”

A thin mist seemed to hang about the harbor as the ship glided in. The air was warm and humid and the general aspect to the land they approached was gray and forbidding. Although they were in the middle of the half year “day” of this region, the quality of light suggested late twilight. The city seemed to have no buildings taller than three storeys and all were of wood painted in sober earth tones. Gael did see some trucks for moving goods from the docks but the majority of transport appeared to be by carts drawn by either horses, reindeer or “draymuths”. He had only seen images of these last in movies and he found them larger than he expected. In the twenty-first century, geneers had worked diligently to bring the wooly mammouth back from extinction and finally did so right around the same time that the last vestages of the habitat for which they had evolved disappeared. Those that were released into the wild did not fare well and although they persist still, their numbers are few. In the region around the Sea of Darkness, they are used as a beast of burden where fuel is hard to come by.

Gael was met on the dock by an Anzhu who introduced himself as Yuri Zubrin.The Captain had engaged him to act as an agent on Gael’s behalf while he was in Morskygorod to cover any needed “gratuities” without overpayment and smooth over any misunderstandings with the locals in whatever manner expediency required. This had come at a premium price, but the captain assured him that he would need the services he provided.

He was thin, tall and very white with a smoothly shaven head. He rarely spoke and never smiled. Gael approved of him, according to Captain Storem he came with a reputation of efficiency and his Spectre of Death appearance could do nothing but aid Gael’s desire that his mission not suffer undue interference. It seemed to Gael that few would wish to spend lengthy amounts of time dickering with this man. Zubrin had engaged a hotel room at a reasonable price and had also rented an aircar for travel to the island on which the Osartifex reputedly lived.

Aoki san had stepped onto the dock and was looking about. “This appears to be a pleasant place. Perhaps I should spend some time here.”

Gael looked at him quizzically. “You must be joking! This looks to be about the dullest place in the world. If I didn’t have specific business here I would wish to be almost anywhere else.”

Aoki raised his eyebrow. “You never did tell me what the nature of your business here was.”

“It is of confedential interest to my order. I am not at liberty to disclose it, but I assure you it is neither sinister nor particularly interesting, merely a mundane chore that a junior member has been sent to accomplish.”

Hiro Aoki’s eyes followed Gael and Zubrin as they got into the hired car, which then rose and moved off toward the center of town.

Gael was unimpressed with his accommodations which were really no better than the cabin he had at sea, a bit smaller if anything. There was a toilet but no bath. For that he would have to use a public bath located elsewhere in the building.

Yuri Zubrin proved to be exceptionally useful. There was little he was unable to accomplish with sure efficiency. At first Gael had questioned the price he had paid for the man’s services, but he had proven his worth. It seemed that *all* transactions involved negotiations, that Gael would have found exhausting and in all likelihood repeatedly resolved to his disadvantage.

He sent Zubrin to the island of the Ostartifex to announce his arrival. Messages had been sent months before from the office of the Lawgiver for Gael to be expected. The office had received back an acknowledgement of the message and nothing else.

Forty-eight hours passed without Zubrin’s return or any word from him. His phone returned a mailbox greeting and nothing else. Gael inquired with local police authorities for help in contacting him. They were not particularly helpful. They certainly knew who Zubrin was, but their attitude toward him was less than friendly.

Gael also discovered that the Canadian embasy in Anzhu could offer little help. It turned out that Zubrin was known to them also as someone who had done good work for them in the past. They were hopeful that he had come to no harm, but could offer little in the way of locating him.

It seemed that he was stuck. He did not have enough cash on hand to hire a second car to make the trip to the island of the Osartifex on his own and only enough to stay in Anzhu a very few more days before he would be forced to return to Yellowknife without anything to show for his journey. Such a result would serve nicely as the final nail in the coffin for his career.

Even without the rising and setting of the sun, the Anzhu people still recognized a difference between night and day and different meal times. The weather was pleasant and less foggy than it had been so Gael had taken an outside table in the hope that the human activity about would cheer him. The meal he was brooding over was a fine breakfast of fruit pelmeni that he was in too poor a humor to enjoy. His black mood was interrupted by a loud, girlish squeal. “Rinkinjutsushi!!!! Hello magic man!”

Startled, he saw Miho bouncing up and down and waiving at him from the sidewalk while Hiro Aoki and Mighty Yoko Sexy looked on. Gael beckoned them to his table.

Aoki bowed before he sat. “How does this lovely morning find you, Mister Wynn?”

“My health is fine, Aoki san, but little else. My business here has come to a standstill and I don’t know how to proceed.” Gael explained how Zubrin had disappeared with the car and how he no longer had a way to get to his meeting. He still did not reveal the exact nature of the meeting, only that his standing in the Order hinged upon it taking place.

“Mister Wynn, I am not without resources. Perhaps I could provide a car.”

For just a moment, Gael dared to hope that his mission could be salvaged.

“Of course my wives and I must accompany you.”

Gael palmed his face. “Of course.” He said.

Flying low and slowly at Miho’s insistence so she could see the sights, it took three quarters of an hour to reach the small island. The sights, such as they were, were forest dotted with occasional small towns enclosed by fences to keep out tigers, wolves and bears. Above was the eternal sunrise and gray clouds. Then over water again and then just as quickly land again covered in trees. A cleared area was near the center. There were seveal small buildings including a small house with smoke issuing from the chimney. The rented car that had vanished with Zubrin was next to the house. Next to one of the other buildings was a huge walled in pen that contained…..

“*Kaiju*!!” exclaimed Miho.

Gael could not take his eyes off of the monster. It stood at least eighty meters tall on a pair of pillar-like legs with disc-shaped feet. Its bullet shaped body was surrounded by a ring of scaly tentacles. There was no distinct head but a ring of eyes above the writhing arms.

“Nothing like that has ever existed on Earth” Said Aoki.

Gael, still transfixed, muttered, “It is not wholly unfamiliar, it has features of several animals, but nothing that large has ever walked on land!”

The car set down beside the other one. Gael got out and called out “Hello!”

Yuri Zubrin appeared from inside the house. Gael glared at him. “Zubrin! Can’t you return a call?”

The tall Anzhu returned his glance without emotion. “It was not convenient.”

“Not convenient!? Return the car to the agency. At that point you will be discharged from my service. The extra rental days will be charged against your salary.”

“Zubrin is actually in my employ.” A second man had emerged from the house, a boy really. He appeared to be no older than seventeen. He was thin with a shaggy mop of sandy hair. His face was still immature, but handsome. “I will take on the rental of the car”

Gael looked back at Zubrin. “You quit without notice? I am certain that you shall be getting no more recommendations from captain Stoerm!” Zubrin’s reply to this was a shrug of his shoulders. Addressing the teenager, Gael asked “Would you be the aspiring adept?”

The youth looked somewhat abashed. “My name is Aleksander Neshemkin.” He pointed in the direction of the gigantic creature. “I created that. I do not believe that I am an *aspiring* anything.”

Gael adopted a more formal stance. “I am Initiate Gael Wynn. I have been sent by the office of the Magistra Ritus Lawgiver to examine you for the position of The Osartifex.” He withdrew an envelope bearing the seal of the Lawgiver from his vest pocket and handed it to the young man.

The boy broke the seal and read the brief letter of introduction. “Initiate? You look old to have not attained your orders yet. Why would they send an initiate and not a high level adept to vett me?”

“My studies are complex and have been interrupted several times. You are part of them as it is to be on the subject of undiscovered adepts. They sent me because I was not needed elsewhere and a number of the high adepts doubted that you even exist.”

As they were speaking, the Aokis had gotten out of the car. Neshemkin looked at them. “Will you introduce your companions?”

“This is Hiro Aoki and his wives Miho and Mighty Yoko Sexy. They offered to take me here after Zubrin disappeared with the car.”

The boy walked over to Mighty Yoko. “You are a robot!”

“I am.” Said Mighty Yoko.

“It is so odd for me to look at you. You are not the material of life.”

“I am a living being like you, just of a distinct metabolic type.”

“No. You are an entirely different order of creation, one outside of my abilities to influence.”

Gael stepped between the two. “The Aokis were kind enough to provide transportation for me and I’ll thank you to show them hospitality, but it is me and only me that you need to worry about today.”

The boy set his lips petulantly but quickly relaxed. “Well, we had best get on with it then.” He said.

Neshemkin offered the Aokis a tour of the compound. Both women accepted and Zubrin led them off to see the sights. Aoki san stayed behind to nap in the car.

Alexander Neshemkin led Gael into the house and to a comfortable living room with a huge fireplace. A lemur-like creature with the head of a cat proweled alon the top of a bookshelf and trilled a friendly noise at Neshemkin as they entered. Once seated, Gael got straight to the point. “Before we begin I wish to address the matter of mister Zubrin. Why did you see fit to snatch him from my employ?”

“Zubrin has served as my assistant ever since I came to these islands two years ago. Although he also does freelance work, his first duty is to me and I found it useful to delay your arrival for a short time.”

“This action of course reflects on the respect or lack thereof that you hold for the Order. I am obliged to report of this to the office of the Lawgiver.” Gael was trying not to let his anger show, but he felt the corners of his lips tighten. “I have been sent here at some expense to examine *your* claim and you have already been obstructive.”

The boy leaned forward in his chair. “Maybe I’m skeptical of the Order’s ability to judge the value of my work.”

“And the Order does not compell you to apply for membership, but it is membership and the title of Ostartifex that you have claimed. If you do not require the protection of the Order and to work as a rogue bonewright, the Order will have nothing to say regarding your qualifications or actions, but the authorities of your nation might.” The threat came out sounding more explicit than Gael had intended. The fact of the matter was that this young man operating without the guidance of the Order would be a nightmare. “So tell me now if you still wish to make your claim.”

The boy sat back again and sighed. “I do.”

“Very well then.” As Gael began questioning Neshemkin in the specifics of his art, the cat-lemur lept down to the couch and fell into an instant slumber beside the lad. They had been conferring for an hour. Neshemkin had produced a display panel to illustrate various specifics, many of which Gael did not understand, but he didn’t really have to. It was only his job to be assured that the boy understood them. He was coming to realize that Neshemkin was probably the most powerful adept in several centuries.

There came a polite cough from a corner of the room. Both alchemists turned their heads to se that Hiro Aoki was standing there and that he held a hand weapon. A small rail gun. Gael was unfamiliar with guns in general, but this one looked more threatening than most. “I am sorry to interrupt your work, Mister Wynn, but Mister Neshemkin must come with me. His services are required by the Japanese government.”

Neshemkin lept to his feet in alarm causing the cat-lemur to bolt to a high rafter. “I most certainly will not go with you!”

“Have you been following me all along? You’re a spy?” Gael was incredulous.

“I suppose you could call me that. I am an agent of the Empire. Rumors had reached us concerning this young fellow, but we had no plausible way to approach him before you came along. All I needed to do was get Zubrin out of the way. A forged electronic message that you asked him to go ahead of you and then a specific virus to block his phone from yours was all it took.”

Neshemkin eyed the gun. “You will not obtain my services if you kill me.”

“And I won’t.” With his left hand he withdrew a second device and pointed it at the Osartifex. Neshemkin crumpled to the floor unconscious. “That is why I also carry a neural disruptor.”

“You should not have done that!” Said Gail taking a step toward Aoki. “I have learned….”

The Japanese centered the rail gun on Gael’s forehead. “Don’t move! I have no reason not to kill *you* if you don’t cooperate.”

The door burst open and Zubrin stood there. His face held more emotion than Gael had ever seen upon it and that emotion looked like fear. “There is an emergency!” He said. Then he saw Neshemkin liying on the floor and Aoki with the gun. Without hesitation, Zubrin tackled Aoki who fired the gun blowing a meter-wide hole through the roof of the house. The cat-lemur let out a sound like a woman’s scream. The gun dropped from his hand and Gael picked it up.

Miho ran in to the house crying out, “Daikaiju sora ga kaiosareru! Rampage!” She saw the scene and stopped dead. “Watashi no otto to issho ni what are you!?”

Gael pointed the gun at her. “Stop! Please speak American and tell me what is going
on.”

Zubrin dragged Aoki to his feet while holding the neural disruptor against his head.

“Giant monster is loose!” Exclaimed Miho.

Zubrin pushed Aoki onto the couch and directed Miho to sit beside him. Gael held the gun on them while Zubrin made sure that Neshemkin was going to be alright. He picked him up. “We must get to car. *Gontosho* is loose and master is no longer controlling him. It is very dangerous situation! We must leave immediately.”

Gael said “Yes. He told me that the creature was linked to his conciousness.” He nodded in the direction of Aoki. “Something this idiot

didn’t bother to find out before knocking him out. How long will he remain unconscious?”

“Hours.”

“Damn.”

Gael held the gun on Aoki and Miho as the walked outside. Zubrin placed Neshemkin gently on the car’s rear couch and had Aoki and Miho sit on the floor of the car. He then shot both of them with the neural disruptor. He said. “Please give me gun before someone is harmed.”

Gael handed him the weapon. “With pleasure. I don’t even know how to fire it.”

There was a crash from the woods and then the nearby trees burst into flames. Out of the roiling mass of fire flew Mighty Yoko Sexy, her clothing in flames, propelled by rocket exhaust from motors where her feet had once been!

Close behind her was the monster Zubrin had called Gontosho. The creature had nothing that could be called a face, but it somehow looked angry as it whipped its masses of tentacles about. Mighty Yoko Sexy flew in an arc close to the ground and then pulled up back toward the creature. She held up a hand and a beam of brilliant blue light struck out at the creature blowing off two of the tentacles and leaving a smoking, cauterized patch where they had been. The creature roared in pain.

“Get into car!” Yelled Zubrin.

“What about Yoko?”

“I think she can care for herself!”

Yoko’s burnt clothing had fallen away leaving her a flying nude goddess of power! Again the beam of light sprouted from her hand, this time blinding several of the creature’s ring of eyes.

The car rose and Zubrin soon had them speeding away as fast as possible. They were over another island when Yoko appeared under rocket power by their side. Green eyes blazing she pointed at the ground. Zubrin tried to ignore her. She held up a hand and a brief flash of blue vaporized a patch of paint from the front of the car. Again she pointed to the ground.

Zubrin landed the car in a small forest clearing and Yoko alighted beside them. As she came within a meter of the ground, her rockets shut off and feet, still clad in high heeled pumps, unfolded from her ankles. Gael and Zubrin stepped out of the car. Zubrin had the rail gun in his hand. Yoko eyed it with contempt. “Do you know where to put one shot to stop me? You shall not live to get a second if you do not. Drop the weapon.”

Zubrin did just that. “What do you want?” Asked Gael.

“Aoki was acting on his own, not under the direction of Chisei no Nihondairiten. I do not want Mister Neshemkin, but the Aokis must come with me to be returned for disciplinary action.”

Gael saw Zubrin smile for the first time ever. “You are telling us that these persons are not our problem? Horosho! Take them!”

The robotic amazon flew off the retrieve the other car. Returning ten minutes later with it, she took the limp forms of Miho and Aoki san away back to Japan. Before she left, she informed Gael and Zubrin that her battle with Gontosho had all but completely destroyed the compound. The Creature was still alive and she recomened against returning to the island. Both Gael and Zubrin agreed that this was good advice.

Shortly after their return to Morskygorod, the Osartifex regained conciousness. He was horrified to learn of the destruction of his compound. After much discussion, it was decided that he would come to Yellowknife to continue his work under the supervision of the Order. With Zubrin’s help, they were able to secure the cooperation of the Anzhu government to allow him to leave the country for education.

It all took weeks, but finally Gale, Zubrin and the Osartifex were on an airship bound for Yellowknife.

Gael took a few moments from his work to look out of the porthole of his cabin as the sun finally dropped below the horizon. “Quite a day!” he thought and the returned to his dissertation.

Ohrwurm

It's all Nixon's fault. If Tricky Dick had never gone to China, he would have never heard the tune at that particular time. It was meta-programing. Gordon Dombrowski was doing a little acid and watching Nixon shaking hands with Zho Enlai and taking tiny sips of white liquor as they toasted everyone in the room individually. There was this other guy standing with them who Gordon though was some sort of sports mascot, a guy in a panda suit. Without the acid in his brain, he would have realized that it was actually Mao Zedong and he wasn't *dressed* like a panda, he just looked like one. Unfortunately that was not the thing going most haywire in his brain at the moment because that was when Dombrowski heard *the tune*. A jaunty march. He would later learn that it was named *Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman*. It seemed catchy to Gordon and he tried to remember it, tried to inscribe it in his brain and, thanks to the psychedelic muse, it worked very well indeed.

Gordon had dropped out of college because it was cutting into his grass smoking time. In response his father informed him that he had to get a job if he expected to stay at home. Bussing tables at a local sandwich shop served him quite well. It was low pressure, he got a cut of the tips and he could do it while baked. It was hard for him to imagine better employment. Maybe being president and partying with Chairman Mao? Nah…he would have to wear a suit and tie.

He was clearing tables and whistling a tune that he did not know the title of, but he liked it. It was just right there in his brain chugging along with a catchy rhythm. Like it? He *loved* it. It was just a part of it because he didn't quite get the whole thing. That was a problem he could remedy.

The China-USA Peoples Friendship Association Bookstore downtown had all sorts of books and records from China as well as an assortment of wacky posters featuring girls with pigtails waiving little red books. All of that was too esoteric for Gordon but after explaining what he was looking

for, the clerk was happy to spin a few records for him until he heard it. *The tune.* It was only the third disk and there it was. The little forty-five only cost fifty cents. One side was the band version and the other was a choral arrangement with traditional Chinese instruments sung (of course) in Chinese. It was the western style band version that held his ear. That was the one that sounded the most like the version that was played for Nixon.

The next few months were for Gordon Dombrowski pretty much the same as the previous few months except now he had this tune *living* in his head, for now a welcome tenant. He hummed it, he whistled it and he was learning to pluck it on the four string banjo. At the end of the year, his father told him he had to find a place of his own over the tearful objections of his mother.

So now he had a room over a working-man's tavern in a poorer part of town. The rent still left him enough for food and enough left over to score a dime bag every couple of weeks. He had the old black & white portable from his parent's attic, little portable record player he got for two bucks at a yard sale, a mattress, a mini fridge and his banjo. It was a simple but somehow not Spartan existence. He would get together with a couple of fellow dropouts to play jug band music on the weekends. Of course he insisted that they learn the tune. For them it was cute and slightly ironic so far as they understood irony, but to Dombrowski it had the resonance of a holy chant.

The years weren't all that good to Gordon Dombrowski pretty much into the early eighties. He didn't get too far in life being a dropout and stoned all the time. For five years he worked at the sandwich shop and stayed a buss boy the entire time. He had skills, but not ambition. He had to vacate the room over the bar when the city closed the building and moved in with his jug band mates. They actually played occasional gigs, usually just for beer, sometimes for nothing, *never* for money. Of course they played *Sailing the Seas* as one of their regular numbers.

Nobody thought it would ever happen, but the day came when Dombrowski finally started to get his shit together. He met a girl who threatened to leave him unless he quit smoking dope. He loved her so he quit. Oh yeah, he didn't get it the first time around. He slipped up, but he thought it was worth it and after a while he noticed that he had been off of weed for six months. He also noticed that he was a thirty-one year old busboy who lived in a tiny apartment with two other guys and none of them *ever* did the dishes. To his great surprise, Gordon Dombrowski was starting to *care* about things like that. He was off the weed for a year when the girl left him. Apparently he wasn't the man of her dreams even when he wasn't stoned, but by that time he was doing filing for a collection agency. He had

to wear a tie, but no jacket so it didn't suck as much as it could have. The other people in the office seemed to like him well enough although his constant whistling annoyed them sometimes. The tune was still there eating at his brain like a sonic tumor. By then he hardly even noticed that he was humming or whistling *Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman*. It was simply a part of his reality.

Times changed Gordon found different friends and another girlfriend, one who didn't see him merely as an object for improvement. The fact is Gordon was actually turning into a decent guy. After another two years he was working the phones at the agency and was more or less happily married.

Gordon's parents in full appreciation of his having become an upright citizen set the young couple up with a little condo in a nice suburban neighborhood.

To her credit, it took Beth almost two months before she even asked him "What is that damned tune you're always whistling, or humming or playing on the banjo?"

"Am I whistling?" He was years beyond even being strongly aware of the tune that played endlessly in his head.

"Of course you are. What's the name of that tune?"

"Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman. It's a Chinese march!"

"Good grief! Do you know that you hum it softly when we make love?"

"I do not!"

"Oh yes you do. I *used* to think it was sort of cute."

"Used to…"

"But now I'm a little worried."

"Babe, it's just a song."

"It's there in the background all the time. It's *weird* Gordie."

"You want me to stop?"

"If you could."

"You know, some people have *real* problems with their marriage. Husbands who drink too much or screw around or just never pay attention to their wives or children. I hum. *That's* our big problem?"

"I know, I know, but it can be very disconcerting."

"You *really* want me to stop."

"More than anything. Sailing the Seas Depends on the Chairman is driving me mad!"

"Helmsman."

"What?"

"Sailing the Seas Depends on the *Helmsman*."

"Gordie, you just have to stop. If I can change my name to *Dombrowski*, you can stop whistling one little tune."

"Hey! Dombrowski is a proud name born by generations of Warsaw lamp-lighters! Suddenly you don't like the name Dombrowski?"

"Gordon! You just need to stop!"

Gordon stopped.

The tune in his head he barely noticed was suddenly all he could think about. He had to constantly remind himself not to whistle it or hum it or play it on the banjo. He would still do it at work and when he was away from Beth, but she had asked various people to tell her if they heard the tune. When she heard about it she would give him *the look* when he got home or when she got word of it. You know the look, the one that eloquently says with a glare and a raised eyebrow "You really *are* just a child, aren't you? You have no self control and must be watched constantly."

Worse of all, their love life suffered for it. He couldn't concentrate on sex without the tune playing in his head and if it was playing he was likely to start humming it. It was too much pressure and before you know it he was getting a prescription for Viagra. Sex happened, but it was mechanical and gave Gordon no pleasure. Frequently he didn't climax at all.

He started making foolish mistakes at work and ended up being denied a promotion. Something had to give.

Gordon finally decided to see a psychiatrist, a man who had an office three blocks from where he worked. His name was Shapiro. He was young and serious and deeply concerned with making Gordon well. "We call your syndrome an *ohrwurm*. It's German for 'earworm'. It means a melody or other sequence of sound that takes up residence in one's consciousness. Many people get them and they are almost always inconsequential ditties. Commercial jingles, just a tiny snatch of a popular song, sometimes even just a drumbeat. They can drive people to distraction, but they usually only hang on for hours or in some cases, weeks. Your case is unusual, but not unheard of. There is at least one case in the literature that lasted sixty years."

"Sixty years! My wife will leave me before then!"

"The amount of time you have been afflicted with this tells me that heroic steps must be taken. I actually have a special interest in cases of this type and have been looking for a test case. Of course, I would perform the surgery gratis."

"Surgery! You want to *cut* the song out of me?!?"

"In a manner of speaking. The melody is inscribed in neurons in a specific portion of your brain associated with sound memory. I believe that I can

locate the nexus and burn it out with electrodes. You would be conscious through the procedure and there would be no pain."

Gordon didn't like the idea of burning a song out of his brain, but he liked the idea of Beth leaving him even less. "When can we do it?"

"Next week. It will be only overnight at the hospital and then you can go home as good as new."

For the week that followed the doctor told him to hum, whistle and play the tune as much as he wanted to make sure the area of the brain was active at the time of the procedure. Beth endured it believing a cure was on the horizon. He delighted in playing it on the banjo enjoying how his fingers seemed to know on their own how to find the notes. He believed he could have played it in his sleep. For the first time in months, Gordon and Beth had truly good sex. Gordon felt like a young bull and Beth had to finally make him stop because he was making her sore.

On the day of the procedure, Gordon was given a shot and was put in a scanner. The drug seemed to be a mild psychedelic. Doctor Shapiro asked him to relax and think about the tune. He lay back with his eyes closed while an orchestra played merrily in his mind. On the inside of his eyelids girls with pigtails in quilted blue jackets and neat black slippers danced joyfully in a circle around the panda chairman as they held tiny red books aloft. Farmers plucked pipas and blew chengs and celebrated the living miracle of Mao Zedong thought. Men danced a giant paper dragon through the scene and tossed firecrackers that blew showers of red stars and leading the band with his banjo was Gordon himself!

"There it is!" Said Shapiro. "I have it pinpointed!"

Gordon was wheeled into the operating room and a local anesthetic was injected into several places around his shaven scalp. The prick of the needles was the only pain he felt. His head was secured in a steel ring with screws. There was vibration and the sound of a drill. "O.k., Gordon, I'm inserting the probe. Then I'm going to apply a slight current so I know I have the right place. You tell me when I have it."

Suddenly the full orchestra was back. It was loud and clear and oh-so-beautiful! "You got it!"

"Here we go then."

Gordon couldn't really describe the feeling, even to himself. What he saw in his mind was a metaphor, this organic thing, a literal worm squirmy/slimy that somehow *was* the song. It was Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman, the earworm. His imagined vision of the electrode, a medieval lance surrounded by busy crackling cartoon lightning bolts penetrated the writhing song worm. It let forth an unearthly psychic squeal as it spewed

smoking green ichor. Bubbling and stinking, it burst into flames and then vanished. The music stopped.

It was silence. Gordon heard silence for the first time in most of his adult life. He tried to recall the tune and sure enough, he knew it. It had not been erased from his memory, but it was no longer resident in that special fortified section of his brain. It was no longer part of his very being. It was just another catchy little tune he knew, but not *too* catchy. Just now it lived outside the citadel of his soul.

He was home the next day. Beth thought he was strangely silent.

"Do you feel o.k., hon?"

"Great."

"I thought you might have some hangover from your anesthetic or the pain pills."

"Nope. I'm just enjoying what it's like to hear myself think."

She smiled wryly. "Me too."

It was at work that he noticed it. The vacuum. It was the place where it had been. It was a piece of space and time shaped exactly like the ragged outline of the tune and inside that rough hollow dwelt a sucking piece of black and timeless nothing. Neither hot nor cold nor anything in-between, it was like the space where there was once dense dead-star matter before it fell through the floor of the universe. It sucked. Literally. It wanted desperately to fill itself with something…anything. It was that thing which nature most abhors.

Gordon started to change. He was more efficient. He took a few courses and got a better job as a personnel director for a construction company. He and his wife came to a sort of equilibrium. They had a baby girl, Rachel and moved to a bigger place outside the city. He put his banjo in the closet where it fell out of tune and gathered dust. He turned forty. He grew a mustache and decided to get in shape but got rounder in the middle instead because it was easier. He still saw Doctor Shapiro once a week. The sessions were free because he was part of his research.

"Tell me about the vacuum." Said the psychiatrist.

"Sometimes I think it's louder than the music was. It's the loudest silence you can imagine."

"That's an oxymoron."

"What?"

"Self contradictory."

"I know, but there it is."

"Can you be more specific?"

"It's like the fear of death. It's that kind of presence it's always there in the background. The difference is that you can't shrug it off by saying to

yourself that it happens to everybody. The only thing that makes fear of death bearable is the knowledge that it's part of the common human experience. The vacuum is just me and me alone."

"I see."

"Tell me, Doctor Shapiro, can you put it back?"

"I don't think…um… You created a meta-program in your brain. I *physically* removed it. It doesn't seem likely that I could restore it the same way."

"I see."

Beth came home with little Rachel and found the door ajar and Gordon's car gone from the driveway. She pushed the door open and looked inside then quickly stepped back outside and dialed 911 on her phone.

The policemen carefully looked around the ransacked apartment. Nothing of value looked like it had been taken. She didn't notice for days that the banjo had been taken from the closet and she never noticed that the well worn Chinese record of Sailing the Seas Depends on the Helmsman had been taken because she assumed that he had thrown it away. The cops assumed that Gordon had been kidnapped.

He was in a Motel 6 a hundred miles from home. He didn't want someone who knew him to spot his car. Gordon had had to turn the house upside-down to find Beth's address book with the list of baby-sitter's phone numbers. They were the only young people he and Beth were familiar with. He was sure that one of them or one of their boyfriends would know where he could get what he needed. He was right. On the nightstand was an assortment of Ecstasy, LSD and Marijuana as well as a few things he had never heard of but the pimple-faced punk had assured him they were "badass".

He had been to a thrift store where he found an old portable record player, one of the ones with the thick center spindle for playing 45's. It cost him a whole eight dollars. He had also gotten a hotplate and a cooking pot and a bag of groceries as well as some new banjo strings.

Not wanting to attract attention with the smell, he cooked the pot into spaghetti sauce and mixed it up with some elbow macaroni.

The record player was the type that would play through a side and then drop the next disc, but if there was no next disk, it would just play the same one over and over. Perfect.

He took the pills, he ate his dinner and he put the record on. Loud.

Oh yes, the room telephone rang, but he ignored it. There came a knocking and then a pounding on the door, but he just picked up his banjo and played along. Good thing he had thought to drive nails into the

doorframe. That would give him more time, at least until they got really serious. The police called through the door asking if he was alright. He ignored them. They cajoled. He ignored. They threatened. He ignored save to politely ask them to leave. It was seven hours before they actually decided to break the door down. The manager informed Gordon that he would be billed for the door as the cops dragged him out.

In his room at the mental hospital Beth stood in his room. “Why, Gordon? Why?”

He chuckled, or at least he tried to chuckle but it came out more as a perverted giggle. “There was an empty space in my life.”

She shot him an amplified version of *the look* and stalked out of the room almost running into Doctor Shapiro as she did.

The psychiatrist regarded him with curiosity. “Did that solve your problem, Gordon?”

“I have my song back. I probably don’t have Beth anymore.”

“And what about the vacuum?”

“Damn you, doc. That bit of brain can’t be rewritten. It’ll be a vacuum forever, but the tune at least keeps me from thinking about it. When can I go home?”

“You’re not mentally competent. All of those drugs at once, I can’t believe how much you took. Do you understand that we had this very conversation not two hours ago?” Gordon couldn’t remember. He couldn’t remember what he had for lunch or even if he had had lunch yet. “Beth had had you committed and I expect you will be here for the foreseeable future.”

Gordon looked thoughtful. He ran his fingers through his hair. “Where’s my banjo?”

The Wrong Tomorrow

June, 1938

Forrest Jennings went to the news stand that morning for a paper, a pack of Black Jack and the latest Astounding Stories! He had really liked the direction of the magazine under its new editor. This issue had a story by L. Sprague DeCamp so he knew he was in for some good reading. He handed over a half dollar and collected his change and headed for Woolworths for a cup of java and to flip through the magazine. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the brunette. He took a second look because she was not your regular Jane, not by a long shot. She was a classy number and she was looking at him curiously.

"That the new Astounding?" She asked him.

Forrest would have told anyone else to dry up. He was teased constantly by his friends because he read "that junk" and had long had his fill of it, but never had any woman shown any interest let alone a doll like this!

"Yes. I read it all the time."

She got up and walked over giving him a little peek at her legs and she hopped up onto the stool next to him. "John Campbell is the editor now, right?"

He was floored. "You read science fiction?" The girl was tall and really built. She looked strong too, like one of those Olympic runners.

She smiled revealing rows of perfect white teeth. "Hello. I'm Lynda, and yes I do." She extended her hand. "We were taught it in school."

"You must have gone to an interesting school. At mine I would get detention when I was caught with something like this."

She laughed and it was like a cascade of silver bells. "If everybody thinks it's bad for you, why do you read it?"

Forrest couldn't believe that this choice bit of calico was actually interested in what he thought about Astounding Stories. "Well, it's about the future, ya know? It's about where we're all going to be. It's just beginning now, ya know. When I was a kid, aviation was just getting started and now we have things like the Hindenburg! Yeah, it burned, but they'll make others, bigger and better! What are we gonna have in ten years? 20 years! At the rate we're goin' we'll have men on the Moon by then!"

Again the girl laughed, like all the girls did when he talked like this, but she wasn't looking at him like he was a dope like the others did. "I think you may be right!"

"Ya do?"

"I do!" She leaned closer to him. She lowered her voice. "I have something I want to show you."

"What is it?"

"Look down…this" Under the counter she held…something. He didn't have anything to relate it to. It looked almost like a black, partially used bar of soap, rectangular with rounded corners. One side of it was covered with little bumps with numbers and letters arranged like typewriter keys. The rest was smooth and black.

"Wazzat?"

"Watch." She whispered. She touched a bump and the smooth part lit up. And there were tiny images all over it. Forrest couldn't tell what they were supposed to be.

"Is that some kind of flashlight? How do you fit the batteries in it?" She tapped one of the small colored images and suddenly a movie was silently playing on it! In colors! It was a rocket ship like the one on the Astounding cover, only this was no painting! He couldn't imagine how she did that! "Some kind of magic trick." He muttered.

"Come with me and I'll show you more." She tapped the bump again and the…whatever-it-was…went dark. She concealed it in her hand as she put it back in her purse.

"How did you *do* that?"

"Come with me."

"Yeah, alright."

She had a second storey apartment only a few blocks from the Woolworth's. It was sparsely furnished as if she hadn't been there long. Some of the furnishings were things Forrest had never seen. On a table there was a slender pedestal that supported a shiny black rectangular plate about three by four feet but only a couple of inches thick. It was connected to a

box with a cable. The box was obviously a machine of some sort although of exactly what sort he had no idea. There were tiny green lights in the plastic case. It had buttons and a glowing panel that showed numbers. When he looked at it closely he saw the numbers looked like they were floating. “Did you make this thing?”

“No. They come from factories by the millions.”

“What a bunch of hooey! I’ve never even seen one! What’s it do?”

“I’ll show you in a minute. I picked you because you have a chance of believing what I say and what you see. I’ll show you. Be right back.” She left the room for a few minutes and then re entered wearing something quite different. She had high heeled sandals made of some transparent material. The dress she was wearing left little to the imagination. He long legs were fully exposed with only a very short skirt that looked like it was made of silver. The little black thing with the bumps hung by a strap from a narrow belt. A scanty top left her charms almost fully unconcealed.

“Holy cow!” Forrest was about to stand up, but gauging the reaction of his body elected to remain seated for the time being. “That’s quite an outfit! You are giving the ‘Girls in cellophane’ a run for their money!”

“Yes, there isn’t much to it. It’s so it can be worn under a space suit easily.”

“Space suit!?”

“Yes. We travel from place to place in rocket ships that fly very high. The cities are under domes and are temperature controlled so we don’t need a lot of clothing to stay warm.”

“Waddaya mean ‘we’? Cities under domes? Rocket ships! What is all this anyway?”

“I thought you would understand. My name is Lynda Fifty-Seven. I came from the future. From the year Two-thousand and ten.”

“Banana oil! That’s over seventy years from now! Nobody can do that!”

“Nobody in your era. It’s very new for us too.”

Forrest was looking her over carefully now. He had never seen a woman with this little on except in pictures passed to him occasionally by smirking friends. She didn’t look like them at all with her broad shoulders, abdominal muscle definition and the fact that she topped his five foot eight by a good four inches! He might have thought it unfeminine if someone had just given that to him as a description, but all of the girl stuff was present and accounted for and then some! Without volition his eyes kept finding their way back to her ample front. He snapped out of it long enough to ask, “So what does this have to do with me?”

“I’ll show you. Sit over here.” She pointed to a place on the couch facing the big rectangular panel. She touched a button on the machine and the panel lit up with moving images. Forrest was amazed. He looked behind himself and saw no projector. This was no movie. He thought it might be some sort of futuristic development of television. He had seen articles about television. It had tiny dim screens and required a huge mechanical apparatus to make blurry black and white images. This was even better than a movie and could be watched in a fully lit room. The first clip was from a newsreel of Hitler speaking before a huge crowd. “I assume you know who this man is.” Said the woman of tomorrow.

“Yeah. That’s Hitler! He’s all wet about most things, but he sure turned Germany around.”

“Yes he did, but his ambitions stretched well beyond Germany. In 1939 he invaded Poland and all of Europe exploded into war! He invaded and took over France and started using bombs on huge rockets against Great Britain!” Newsreel footage of Europe in smoking ruins was on the screen, bodies littering the streets, Nazi storm troopers everywhere.

“Holy jeepers! Willya look at that!” Exclaimed Forrest.

“It got worse. The Germans allied with the Japanese. The Japanese destroyed the United States’ Pacific fleet at Pearl harbor in the Hawaiian Islands.” Footage of the Pearl Harbor bombing was shown. Ships sinking, buildings in flames. “In a matter of months, the Japanese had overrun the Pacific and then they invaded California and pushed inland. The Americans fought bravely, but the Japanese were ruthless and had developed enormous war machines.” There were scenes of robots the size of buildings with the Rising Sun emblazoned on their chests marching through burning cities. “Having captured Britain, the Germans also invaded the American east.” Footage of planes with the Nazi cross on their tails dropping bombs over New York. The Empire State building was shown crashing down in a fountaining pillar of dust and flame, theater patrons in their evening finery running down Broadway with Nazi tanks rolling behind them. “America was cowed but not conquered. In the west a secret project was underway. The power of the atom was being studied to create a super weapon.” Footage was shown of the Trinity test in all of its awesome horror. “A single bomb could devastate a city.” Hiroshima’s destruction was shown with gory details of the aftermath. People burned, bottles melted, humans reduced to dust and shadows. “The bombs fell on Tokyo, Berlin, German occupied Paris, Japanese occupied Los Angeles and a hundred other cities. Atomic rays destroyed the air forces of Germany and Japan.” There were scenes of Zeppelins and bombers suddenly exploding at high altitudes as brilliant red

rays reached up from the Earth and burned them from the sky. “The new American Air Navy with its atomic powered rocket ships restored order to the world!” There were scenes, now in brilliant Technicolor of graceful looking rocket ships flying in formation over the phantasmagoric towers of rebuilt Paris, London and New York.

“America and the Soviet Union in cooperation built a new world of peace and plenty. In 1950, we landed men on the moon and on Mars four years later.” There is beautiful color footage of a space-suited man standing on an orange tinted landscape with an American flag on his shoulder shaking hands with…something not human, a Martian! “The Martians had much to teach us. They knew the secrets of anti-gravity, instant architecture, life extension and how to make space ships that could cross between the stars!” There was something strange on the screen, like a disc attached to a cylinder that had two other cylinders attached to it. There was a globe of the Earth behind it, but this globe had clouds. It *was* the Earth and this strange thing was some sort of space ship…a *starship*! “The nineteen-sixties were an amazing era of exploration that only began with the six planets beyond Pluto. There are wonders out there you would scarce believe, Forrest.”

Forrest’s eyes bugged out as he saw scene after scene of alien beings, alien vistas, huge starships and battles in space. “My God!” he said and then “My God!” again.

The glorious amazon from the future reached over and turned off the machine. Forrest still gaped at the blank surface for a few seconds more until she placed a finger on his chin and turned him toward her. Their faces were inches apart. “There is one problem.” She said.

“Problem?” He said. “It looks like such an amazing world! What could be the problem?” She was close enough for him to tell she wore no perfume save for the scent of a natural woman.

“The War. The atom weapons. They depleted the vitality of our men! Every generation since the war fewer and fewer have been able to become fathers. Something from the radiation has made them…less than men.” She met his gaze. Her green eyes held his. “*Real men* I mean.”

His voice came only with great effort and was a trifle too high. “Ya don’t say.” He said.

“I need you to come back with me.” She said.

“To the future?”

“Yes. To the future. Only one couple in a hundred has a child. There were only fifty babies born in New York City in 2009! The population of humanity continues to drop. They found us, the best specimens of young womanhood and have sent us back to find men to give us children and

restore the vitality of the human race! I hope you are that man for me, Forrest! I need you to put a baby in me!"

"Yikes!"

"What's wrong? Don't you find me desirable?"

"And then some, lady!" Forrest was actually shaking a bit. "But ya gotta admit that this is some story you're telling me here! How do I know it isn't just a bunch of malarkey?"

She held out the small device. The screen was lit with an image of the saucer and cylinders starship zooming through space. "Do you have anything like this? Can your civilization manufacture this?"

He stared at the tiny miracle in her hand and again his eyes homed in on her bosom. "Could I come back?"

She pouted. "If you really want to. I hope I could make you want to stay with me." He just bet that she could. "There are just a few details. The project and the very fact of time travel are top secret. You can't talk about it or me and you will be given a job. If anybody asks about the way you act or talk, just tell them you're Canadian."

The device looked too simple to be a time machine. "It's basically an antenna." She said as she placed it in the center of the table. "It lets the mechanism find us anywhere in time. When the switch happens, we and everything in the room will be in twenty-ten."

August 2010

And then they were. The room wasn't what Forrest expected, but then again, he had had no idea what to expect. A man stood by a panel on the wall that was covered in lights and buttons. He was wearing short pants and a shirt without sleeves. "Greetings Lynda Fifty-seven." He said.

"Hello Randolph Nine." She replied. "Everything went fine."

Forrest looked "Randolph Nine" over appraisingly. He was big and well built, but Forrest knew he had it all over him in the virility department. He already could tell that he would stand a little taller in the world of the year two-thousand-and-ten!

Lynda looked at him "Randolph will show you where you're going to stay. I'll see you real soon." Then she kissed him full on the lips, a kiss that promised…everything. "I have to go now, darling. Go with Randolph."

Randolph led him down a sparklingly clean corridor. There were screens like the advanced television that Lynda had shown him along the walls. They displayed scenes of ongoing battles both on strange landscapes and also in the star filled blackness of outer space. The combatants were humans

against large and ugly red creatures that seemed to be half insect and half tiger. Forrest asked about them.

"The Vorgon War is getting bigger all the time. You'll learn all about it soon." He pointed to a poster on the wall that showed a man in a space suit with a ray gun in hand standing atop a pile of the dead aliens. Above in large metallic letters were the words, EARTH NEEDS YOU FOR THE VORGON WAR! At the bottom of the poster were a number glyphs that looked like military insignia and some words that might have been Japanese! Forrest didn't have time to try and read them as Randolph hustled him past.

"Oh!" There was a somewhat uncomfortable pause. Forrest tried to lighten things. "Say, that Lynda is some tomato, huh?"

Randolph Nine looked puzzled. "She's what?"

"You know, a hot biscuit, a real doll."

Randolph continued to look puzzled and changed the subject. "There is a netbook in your room that will give you access to the building's intranet. I'll show you the basics of how to use it."

" 'Netbook'? 'Intranet'?" It seemed that there were communication difficulties in both directions.

"No worries, you'll be up to speed in no time."

"Yeah, I'll get wise."

The "netbook" was an amazing object. It really was no larger than a small magazine and only slightly thicker. With the click of a little latch it opened like a book but there were no pages inside. There was a tiny keyboard sort of like a typewriter on one side and on the other just a shiny black surface that he, it turned out correctly, assumed was a screen like the one on the television. Randolph showed him basic functions. Forrest tended to pound on the keys much harder than necessary until he learned they required only a slight touch. This "book" would answer questions he typed on the keyboard and would perform numerous other tasks as well. The purposes of most of them were completely obscure to him. It was electric and was recharged from the master atomic batteries from a wall outlet but then could be used unplugged for quite some time. Whatever stored power inside of it was miraculously efficient. Once he activated it, the little machines set immediately to displaying information, mostly in the form of moving pictures about the world he was now a part of. One of the first things he learned was that all citizens took part in the war against the Vorgon empire. The Vorgons had started it by invading and then completely destroying a human planet on the galactic frontier. Since then, the human worlds have been trying to drive the Vorgons back into their own space. Their cultural imperative is to conquer the entire galaxy as opposed to the humans who

wish to bring peace and freedom to the entire galaxy. Battle tactics were controlled from battle stations on Earth and other planets. Apparently Forrest would have to learn to do this.

The facility into which Lynda had brought him was apparently secret, but Forrest saw news reports. Most of the news was about events not taking place on Earth. Trade, exploration and the Vorgon war were all subjects that received a lot of coverage. There were many reports from a major exploratory expedition led by a certain Captain Picard on the other side of the galaxy. He did get to see news about Earth which in the time since the great war had suffered a great loss of population. The planet was dotted with beautiful cities under domes with wilderness in between them. People went from city to city in rocket ships. For shorter jaunts, strap on atomic rocket packs seemed to be popular. Forrest wasn't too sure he was eager to try one of those. He was happy enough that he was in the world of the future. He was brought a meal of various foods that came in containers of expanded plastic foam. He was surprised to see that it was a double hamburger sandwich (with salad dressing?) with fried potatoes and slightly strange tasting Coca-Cola. The meat and potatoes were both very evenly cut out, like they had been made in a factory. He wasn't sure why but he had expected something less mundane, like food from Mars or something. Maybe they were trying to ease him into his new era with things that were more familiar. That must have been it.

There was a radio that played soft music. Forrest didn't recognize any of the tunes and didn't expect to. The styles of most of them were not like anything he had heard before which was to be expected also.

In the morning he was given an *electric* toothbrush that he found slightly frightening. It took him a couple of tries before he was brave enough to put it in his mouth. It used a tooth paste that was transparent and blue. He consulted the netbook and learned that tooth powder pretty much no longer existed.

Randolph Nine appeared at his door with another tray filled with expanded plastic foam containers. There was a cup of coffee that was quite good a formed patty of fried potatoes and something called a "breakfast burrito" which was scrambled eggs mixed up with bits of sausage and cheese wrapped in some sort of thin bread. It came with a chunky, spicy vegetable compote of some sort and was actually quite tasty once he figured out how to eat it. It seemed that all of the food in 2010 was designed to eat out of hand and came in plastic packaging. It all seemed rather sterile.

"Where is Lynda?" he asked.

“She has to work and so do you.” While he ate his breakfast, Randolph explained that he would be trained in how to use a work station in the war against the Vorgons.

The War Room, as it was called was a large carpeted office divided up into many small spaces so that each desk was mostly but not entirely shielded from sight. It looked like these cubicles provided just enough privacy from distraction to allow the operators to concentrate on their tasks while the supervisors could still keep an eye on their charges. He was lead straight through the office into a room with folding chairs and another large screen video device. A man stood at the front of the room. He wore Leather boots that came to his knees and Khaki Jodhpurs with a black leather belt and a tight fitting blue shirt with a large yellow lightning bolt emblazoned on the front. One of the hand-held devices, Randolph had told him it was a telephone among other things, hung from a clip on his belt. He stood over six feet and had a square jaw and perfect wavy black hair. Forrest might have disliked him instantly based on that alone were it not for the fact that he knew himself to be more of a man where it counted.

“I am Captain Robert Seventy-Eight and I am here to induct and orient you gentlemen into your jobs in The Vorgon War.”

Forrest looked around the room. There were four other men who looked as much out of place here as he did. They were given schooling in how to operate their remote controllers which were a strange combination of a typewriter, one of the televisor devices and a little gadget which had the word “Microsoft” on it that was slid around the desktop to position the armaments. It took most of the morning for the class to understand what they were to do.

They were finally taken back through the office to a lunch room where they were given more food in plastic containers. This time it was tiny pieces of boneless chicken, at least that’s what Forrest thought it was, that had been breaded and fried and they came with “dipping sauces” One that was sweet and fruity, one that was like sweet mustard and one that was sweet and spicy, they also had Coca-Cola again. Something was just *off* about the soda, but Forrest couldn’t put his finger on it. They were also given small individual apple pies that appeared to also have been fried. The fellow across the table from Forrest commented on the chicken. “Aren’t these things just the bee’s knees?”

Forrest chuckled “It’s been a while since I’ve heard that expression.”

The man looked suddenly embarrassed. “Oh!….right, well, I’m from Canada.”

“Oh ho!” Thought Forrest. He smiled and winked “Don’t worry, so am I.” He reached across the table to shake the other man’s hand. “My name is Forrest…” he was about to give his last name when he realized that people in 2010 didn’t have last names but numbers. “Just call me Forrest.”

The other man smiled brightly and said “Andrew, pleased to meet you!” as he shook Forrest’s hand. It turned out that the other three were from Canada too, one of them from a part of Canada where they were apparently still fighting the Great War.

After their luncheon, they were escorted back to the lecture room where they were assigned numbers. Forrest Jennings was now Forrest Sixteen and was given a tag to attach to his shirt that had that name and a picture of him that must have been taken somehow by the netbook because he recognized part of his room in the background. He was also given a vest that had his name on the back. Finally he was given one of the phone devices. He was told it was disabled for out of building calls for security reasons. All he had to do was punch in the name and number of the person he wanted to speak to. Before they were brought out to their work stations, he excused himself to answer the call of nature and quickly punched in Lynda 57. To his surprise her face appeared on the small device, a television image. “Hello, this is Lynda!” Said the image.

“Lynda, Hello!” Said Forrest brightly, but halfway through she interrupted him.

“I’m afraid I’m in a security zone right now and can’t respond, but you can leave a message when you hear the tone.”

Forrest didn’t know what to do. What in the world was this? He just blurted, “Lynda darling, I just wanted to hear your voice.” And then he hit the disconnect button.

His workstation was Spartan. There was the machine with which he would do his work and little else. A list of the names of his co-workers was tacked to the wall. He noted that thumb tacks had not changed since 1938.

Fighting the war was incredible! His job was to command a tank-like vehicle that got around on legs rather than treads it could literally leap in the air and cross ravines which the remote planet where the battle was taking place had a great many of. The tank had what was called a “health” meter to let him know its condition and a fuel meter. The machine was self repairing so long as he could direct it to places where there were caches of parts and there were fuel stations in various places also. There were Vorgons both on foot and in their own war machines. They were clever fighters and before too long one of them was able to toss a grenade that destroyed his tank.

Forrest was horrified! The value of the tank must have been immense! Without comment, the work station assigned him another one and he continued the battle. He was far more careful, even a bit timid. He looked up for a second to see Captain Robert Seventy-eight standing there. “Don’t be too careful, son. We have an almost endless supply of materiel. Be aggressive! Those Vorgons need to be turned back!” Forrest engaged more aggressively and promptly lost another tank. He looked up at the Captain helplessly but was surprised to see he had a broad grin. “That’s the way we do it! All these Vorgons respect is pure fighting spirit!”

Throughout the rest of his shift he lost five more tanks and he couldn’t tell if he had moved the Vorgon line much at all. Even so the captain shook his hand when he was on the way out. When he got back to his room there was another sandwich in a plastic clamshell waiting for him with some of the fried potatoes and coke. The sandwich was a round roll that had a square piece of fried and breaded fish with a slice of melted cheese on it. It was eminently edible if not particularly exciting. He discovered in the room’s tiny icebox that there were some cans, not tin he decided but aluminum, with little rings on top. He experimentally pulled one and a fine spray of mist emerged with a familiar smell. He pulled harder and a rounded wedge shaped part of the can’s lid came free. Beer! He took a sip and tried again to connect with Lynda receiving the same message as before. He left another message.

He watched a historical documentary called Destination Moon which he found fascinating and clued him into a bit more of the history of the world after his time and then he turned in.

In the office the next day he saw Andrew, now known as Andrew Two-Sixty-Four, and they talked for a bit about their experiences so far. He didn’t say as much, but he seemed slightly bothered. Forrest asked him if anything was wrong and he said he couldn’t talk about it so Forrest let it go.

Three days passed that were pretty much the same. Forrest became more adept at handling the tank and the Captain hinted that they may try him in a space battle, a prospect that he found incredibly exciting. This whole business of fighting a war without the risk of being killed was working out just fine for him. His only problem was not being called back by Lynda. It had gone on too long. He asked Randolph, but all he could get out of him was that she was probably on assignment.

On the fourth day, Forrest was speaking again with Andrew who looked as frustrated as he felt. “What’s wrong pal?” he asked.

“Girl trouble.” He said.

"No kidding? What kind?" Forrest felt a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"She won't talk to me." He met Forrest's eyes "I'm not supposed to talk about it."

The feeling in Forrest's stomach got stronger. He swallowed. "It's just you and me, pal. Maybe ya need to get it off your chest."

"Thanks. You're right. She's such a swell girl, Lynda…"

"Lynda!?"

"Yeah, Lynda."

"Lynda Fifty-Seven?"

Andrew stopped short. "How'd you know that?"

"I've got a bad feeling, pal. A bad feeling."

"Waddaya mean?"

"Just what part of 'Canada" are you from, anyway?"

"I'm not supposed to talk about it."

"I'll tell you what part I'm from, the New York City in 1938 part! Now come on, how about you?"

Andrew was silent for a couple of seconds and then finally said, "Boston, 1927."

"And I suppose that Lynda brought you here to get her in a family way."

"Yeah, that's right. What's that to you?"

"Me too."

He straightened up and took a step closer to Forrest. "Ya don't say."

"Easy there! Even if you don't know it, you and I are on the same side. Something's going on here that isn't square!"

Andrew eased back a little. "We better get to lunch before they start wondering what's keeping us." He tried to glare dangerously at Forrest, but he really wasn't the dangerous type.

They sat opposite one another eating out of their plastic containers.

Forrest realized that he hadn't had a fresh vegetable since he had come to the twenty-first century. It struck him as odd given all the wide open space for farms between the domed over cities. Even in wartime, food ought to be cheap. He had read The Jungle and now he was wondering what was in those hamburgers and bits of chicken. Were they some kind of cattle? These dark notions were taking him over. He needed to clear his mind, he had important work. He had to go back and fight a war on a planet orbiting a distant star…

He went to the bathroom and dialed Lynda again and got the same message as before. He was going to leave a message that said he knew all

about Andrew, but thought better of it. He needed to think. He could work this out.

He was walking down the corridor to the office when he saw a brown hand gesture to him from a door, beckoning. He approached and opened the door wider until he saw the face of a tall Negro. He reached out and grabbed Forrest and pulled him through the door and slapped his hand over his mouth. “Relax, buddy! I’m one of the good guys!” He said in a harsh whisper. “I’m gonna take my hand off of your mouth and let you go, but for your own good, don’t run and don’t make any noise. I will not hurt you.”

Forrest nodded his consent and the man let him go. He was terrified. Who was this guy? He looked around. They were in another corridor but this one was unlit but there was light coming in through windows. The only views of the outside that Forrest had seen since he had gotten here was through televisor screens. Forest looked out. The landscape had scrubby grass occasional buildings, some looked like factories, warehouses or apartment blocks. He turned back to the man. He was wearing a loose fitting sleeveless shirt with the number 23 on it. On the back was the name “James”. “So, are you James Twenty-Three?” He asked.

“What? No, man. My name is Marvin Hayes. I’m a detective with the New York Police department.” He flipped open a badge for Forrest to examine.

“Detective? I didn’t think they let…..” He let it trail off as the man scowled at him.

“I’m going to let that pass because I’m starting to think there are special circumstances in play here, but you keep in mind that I’m a damn good cop and I just saved your ass.”

“You what? My what?”

“Look, right now you need to come with me. I’ll arrest you if I have to, but all I really want to do is have a conversation with you.”

“I’ve got work! The war...”

“There is no war, man, at least not against any ‘Vorgons’. Take a look at this.” He walked over to a cardboard box and pulled out what looked like a slender book and handed it to Forrest.

Forrest examined the object. It was a thin rectangular case wrapped in cellophane. The case itself looked like it was made of plastic. There was a picture on the front showing a raging Vorgon in a legged tank very much like the one he controlled. Earthmen were firing ray guns at it. It looked like a magazine cover and had in big display type “The Vorgon War”. There was a box with a black letter ‘M’ and the words ‘Mature 17+’ and another box had an elaborate symbol and the words ‘X-Box 360’. He tore off the

cellophane and after a brief struggle opened the case. Inside was a disc of plastic that had the same illustration on one side and on the other it just reflected rainbows. “What is this?”

“It’s a game, a fantasy game.”

“Banana oil!”

“I’m ain’t shittin’ you.”

Forrest went over to the window and looked out. “Is it really twenty-ten?”

“Yep.”

“So we really did go to the Moon and Mars and all the planets?”

“Some people went to the Moon. That was about forty years ago. No one ever went again. No one ever went to Mars or any of the other planets. It’s just us here on Earth tryin’ to get along with each other.”

Forrest was feeling light headed. The big man grabbed his arm and led him out a door and to a car. The car had sleek lines, but it didn’t look like it could fly. The landscape looked depleted. There were many empty lots surrounded by rusty chain-link fence. “Where are we?”

“Staten Island. These people built their office outside of Manhattan so they were more out of sight. I’m going to take you into downtown. The 120th gave me the alert, but the main investigation against these guys is being run out of the 10th.” Forrest didn’t understand any of that except that he was being taken downtown. They crossed a bridge into Manhattan. No dome was in evidence. There were tall buildings, hundreds more than in his day, but they didn’t look like the colorful towers shown in Lynda’s news reels. Some were covered in mirrors; some had slightly exotic curves, but most were just big concrete boxes. There were no flying cars or big airships above the streets, but nor were there lots of telephone lines. The Empire state building was still standing as he remembered it. It apparently had not been destroyed by German bombs.

“Big buildings.” said Forrest absently.

“Used to be more of them.” Remarked Detective Hayes.

Forrest pondered that as he continued to observe New York. Except for strange clothing and hairstyles, most of the people on the street looked pretty much the same as in his time. The great majority were not perfect physical specimens like Lynda Fifty-Seven. Many of them were punching buttons or talking on hand held devices. Much of this city seemed to be simply overlaid on the one he was familiar with. They actually drove past the building where Lynda’s apartment had been only now it had a shoe store on the bottom floor and all of the windows had been replaced in a different style. No bombs had flattened *this* city, that was for sure.

The police station was in a building that had been there in ’38. It had a cornerstone that said 1905, but a lot of it had been rebuilt, probably several times.

The detective left him in a room with a steel grate on the window and a large mirror on one wall. He returned a few minutes later wearing a suit and carrying a cup of coffee with cream that he handed to Forrest. Detective Hayes sat him down at a table. A Chinaman with a short spiky haircut joined them. “This is my partner, Detective John Li.”

“Pleased to meet you.” said Li as he shook hands with Forrest.

“You speak English very well.” remarked Forrest, which earned him a peculiar look from Li.

“Um, right. Thanks, I guess.” He picked up a sheet of paper and looked it over. “How long have you been employed by Mastersoft Games, Mister Jennings?”

“Who?”

Hayes spoke up “I don’t think he has the whole picture yet.”

Li looked at Forrest intently. “What is your date of birth, Mister Jennings?”

“The sixth of March, nineteen fourteen.”

“And your age?”

“Twenty-four.”

“Really? Well you do look it, I have to admit, but that date of birth was ninety-six years ago. How do you account for the discrepancy, Mister Jennings?”

“I traveled through time.” He looked at his shoes. “It’s supposed to be a secret.”

Hayes spoke up. “Most people in the twenty-first century believe that time travel is impossible, but starting about six months ago a few strange things started happening that have made some folks think differently. We got a call from someone at Columbia University. A lab had been robbed of hardware, software. The suspect was a former student who now works for Mastersoft.”

“What’s ‘software’?”

“We don’t have time to explain everything, Mister Jennings. No doubt your absence has already been noticed. The point is that it was material relevant to time travel. Mastersoft makes games, games that run on computers. The kind of work station you were using is what we call a computer. It’s not like an adding machine or a slide rule.”

“No. That’s just a communication device.”

"I'm afraid not, Mister Jennings. It is a device that can calculate numbers so fast that they can be used to make sound and moving pictures in real time. People use them to do work, but they also use them to play games. The Vorgon War is a game that is played over a world wide network of computers. Your job was to be an opponent for subscribers to the game. There never was a real war."

"You're full of baloney!"

"A disgruntled former employee came to us a month ago and spilled the whole thing. They had gotten a hold of the stolen time travel device and they were using slave labor from the past to run their game. They were telling the public and their stockholders that they had devised a particularly good artificial intelligence."

Forrest squinted and rubbed his temples. "Artificial intelligence…"

"Like an electronic brain." Said Hayes.

"You don't dress like they do."

"No one does. You've been scammed, Forrest. It's a con game."

"So…stupid." Said Forrest.

Li looked at him sympathetically. "The guy who came to us told all about the fake history you were fed. I thought it was a bunch of shit when I first heard it, but I followed up. We got a guy inside Mastersoft who needed to cut a deal on a crystal meth charge. They had you guys playing as the Vorgons, but from your end they made it look like the subscribers were the Vorgons. There were at least a dozen of you guys who they got to come with them."

Forrest didn't understand, nor did he care. His whole reality was in ruins.

"Hey!" said Li, "You still with us?"

"Yes." He mumbled.

"How did they get you to come?"

"Lynda."

Hayes nodded. He pulled a photo out of a folder and slid it across the table to him. It was a picture of Lynda in a swimsuit with her hair much shorter. "Is that her?"

"Yes, that's her."

"That is Lynda Benson, Olympic diving silver medalist and Mastersoft vice president in charge of product development. She's smart and she sure is something to look at. Maxim named her as the hottest babe in sports last year."

"Maxim who?"

"Never mind, it's not important." Hayes waived him off. "The point is that right now police officers are raiding the place and all of that company's

execs are going to face charges ranging from stock fraud to burglary to industrial espionage to violating laws against impressing people into slavery."

Forrest was put up in a motel while the trial went on. He and Andrew and the others all testified. Lynda Benson, Ronald Oaks and Robert Davidson, who was not a captain of anything, as well as two other executives sat passively with their lawyers as witness after witness brought damning evidence against them. None of them took the stand in their own defense.

At the request of both Colombia and The Pentagon, the time travel angle was played down as much as possible and that part of the testimony took place in chambers with the jury under strict oath never to discuss it..

Conviction was obtained. "THREW AWAY THE KEY!" screamed the headline on the Post. "CYBER-SLAVERS GET JUST DESERTS" trumpeted the Daily News. "MASTERSOFT DEFENDANTS RECEIVE MAXIMUM SENTENCE." stated the Times soberly. "WE'RE EATING MORE SOYDOGS!" chirped USA Today.

Forrest and the other abductees were also part of the huge class action against Mastersoft's remaining assets. It looked like that would take years and no one seemed to be able to answer Forrest's question as to when or if he could be sent home. It turned out that the time travel device that Mastersoft had stolen was considered exceedingly dangerous not only for those who travel through time, but for the time stream itself. It was deemed to be far too risky to allow anyone to ever use it again.

During the months of the various trials, Forrest had acquainted himself with the real twenty-first century and found that he was more impressed with the ways the world *hadn't* changed than those it had. He was dazzled by the Internet and how people were more connected than he ever dared imagine they could be, but he was horrified at how it had not resulted in eliminating their differences. To the contrary it seemed to have made them greater and more immediate. And there were a *lot* of people. The population of the world was many times that in his era although, strangely, there was less starvation. The president of the United States was a Negro, a man who was as articulate as Booker T. Washington and possibly as visionary as Roosevelt, but he had been embattled and hobbled from the moment he took office. His opponents never directly spoke of his color, but Forrest could see that it was the real issue, what people in this time called "the elephant in the room." Things had changed and things had stayed the same.

The way people spoke was both crude and sophisticated. The average person knew more about world events, science and culture than in the world he had known, but superstition was still rampant and possibly more

prevalent than in his time. Even educated people used a surprising amount of foul language including women!

There were people in space, in orbit of Earth, but there was no one on the Moon or Mars or anywhere else but the surface of this one planet or within a hundred miles of it. In spite of this Science Fiction was no longer a specialty interest, but of huge cultural import. It was this era's Science Fiction films and television programs that Lynda had used to deceive him, but all of that was still just a dream. Yes, there were robots and space ships and picture telephone communication and three dimensional movies and access to information anywhere, anytime, but none of these things were the way they were *supposed* to be. Where was the *real* future?

Forrest wanted out. He wanted to go home. He kept calling the team at Columbia who had invented the time travel device and was told time and again that they could not help him. The use of that technology was forever banned. Even nuclear weapons had fewer restrictions; they could at least *test* them. An atomic bomb could only change history *after* it had been used, not before.

Forrest and the others were able to sell their story and as a result were able to live comfortably enough at least for the time being, but they would have to acquire skills that would allow them to fend for themselves in the twenty-first century eventually. Forrest had been studying to become an architect, but he decided that he had to learn about computers because it seemed that it was what anyone had to know to get by in this world.

A year had passed when Forrest got an email from a fellow who had been with the Columbia time travel project but was now working in Boston. He said he might be able to help.

Forrest met with a serious young man in a lab at a private corporation near Boston. He explained a number of strange concepts to Forrest that he couldn't understand, but the one he *could* understand stood out. He was told that time was not one road but many and this fellow had figured out how to change from one road to another. He proposed that since Forrest didn't feel he was in the right future, perhaps he might want to try a different one.

He didn't have to think. He said yes.

December 2012 New York City

Forrest did love New York with its glittering dome enclosing all five boroughs and its mile high towers. There was so much to do there, the nightlife, theaters, the Central Park Zoo with its collection of animals from twenty planets, the robot servants and delivery men and the sky above the

pedestrian streets filled with flying cars! It was a wonderland, but he would have to leave it. That was jake with him. His ship for Ganymede was leaving the next day and from there he would be off on a two month journey to Alpha Centauri. This was a little more like it.

Nov-Shmoz-Ka-Pop!

I
The Hitchhikers

"Nov-Shmoz-Ka-Pop!" read the sign carefully drawn in black magic marker. It was on cardboard cut from the side of a case of Piel's long neck bar bottles.

Joe regarded the sign doubtfully. "Do you really think this'll get us rides? It's gibberish!"

"Have a little imagination! Anyone who has ever read *The Squirrel Cage* will pull right over!"

"Fantastic, we're gonna get a ride from my grandma! Maybe she'll have good weed."

"Don't be like that. Creativity is a selling point! If we have a sense of humor, we're probably not going to kill them if they pick us up!"

It was Friday, July second, 1976. Joe and me wanted to get out of town before the Bicentennial festivities took over the city. We both worked at the same place in Boston, a little publishing company running the mailroom. We were expected at work on Tuesday after the office had been closed for the last week. That's how they did it at Buckman Press, the whole office closed for a week for everyone to take vacation at the same time. We all disliked it. If we needed time off at any other time of the year we had to take sick time or just take it without pay. We knew folks in Northern Virginia who were having a big party so we went and enjoyed the proverbial wine, women and song as well as in my case tons of pot. Joe didn't partake, he said weed gave him headaches. Maybe that's why the sign made so much sense to me and so little to Joe.

Getting out of DC was always a little tricky. We wanted to catch someone who was actually heading north rather than just around the Beltway. We knew from experience that could go on forever with people who were just going one or two exits. We wanted someone going at least as far as Baltimore.

The sign was actually doing its job. Drivers were looking at it and some were even slowing down to read it. It only took about twenty minutes for the first person to stop, a guy in a pick-up only going as far as the Beltway. We

thanked him, but really had to pick up someone going further so we let him go. Only a minute later a guy stopped who was going to Philly.

I enjoyed hitch hiking for a number of reasons. One of the big ones was that I got to meet people who I wouldn't ordinarily meet. A lot of folks who would pick me up would be long hair hippie types like myself, and those folks always felt safe and friendly although even they would frequently have surprising facets. Just as often there were truckers, traveling salesmen, farmers, rednecks, military guys, and tortured souls who wanted to confess their sins to someone they will never see again.

The guy who picked us up had a big roomy white car. I thought it was a Cadillac when it was pulling up but when it got close I saw it didn't have the distinctive shield or Cadillac logo. It had a name on the side in florid chrome script, but before I could figure out what it said we were inside.

The guy at the wheel was wearing a suit but had a ponytail. Common enough today, but not a combination you saw a lot during the '70's. He had a big almost Duane Allman style mustache. We chucked our packs in the back and Joe followed them. I took shotgun.

We introduced ourselves, his name was Daniel Boden and he described himself as a "traveling man". He looked to be in his thirties and had that intense look that some truckers who take speed have. I thought that he might be the type to have some good weed, but he never offered any.

Between us on the front bench seat was a sort of wooden suitcase. I figured it was a sample case for whatever it was he sold.

Part of the deal with hitchhiking is making conversation. The main reason people pick up hitchhikers is they want someone to talk to. I was always happy to oblige, I have always been interested in the stories people have to tell. "What's in the box?" I asked.

"Like I said, I'm a traveling man."

"So samples?"

"I deal in services, not products. Go ahead and look." The case had a kind of latch I had never seen before, but it wasn't too difficult to open. Inside was something utterly beautiful. It was like one of those complex antique clocks, except that this looked brand new. It was made mostly of shiny brass and steel but there were also parts that looked like they had been carved from crystalline quartz. The parts were attached to a frame of brass and steel plates. There were a few dials, but the device was clearly not a clock. It was more like some sort of scientific instrument. At the center of the mass of busily moving parts was a rapidly spinning flywheel, like a gyroscope. There was a pair of round plates, each about the size of a quarter held about an inch apart between which there was a glowing rose colored nimbus.

“Holy shit! Joe take a look at this!”

Joe stuck his head up over the seat and gaped at the device. “Whoah! What is it?”

Daniel answered. “That is a resonator. It helps people be where they need to be.”

You know, if you hitchhike, you meet a lot of people who talk in riddles. I don’t know what Joe thought, but I was pretty sure Boden was fucking with me.

Joe bit. “Where we need to be is Boston, can it help us be there?”

“Boston, huh. I’m actually going there, but I have to stay for a day in Philadelphia.”

I shook my head. “Well have to find another ride out of Philly. We can’t hang out for a day there.”

“Well, I’m happy to get you that far at least.”

Joe and I have discussed this many times since, but we cannot put together a coherent timeline for what happened. The beautiful little machine was back in its box and we discussed it no further. We agreed that its fascination had simply vanished. It was all small talk until Daniel left us off near an entrance to the Jersey Turnpike and we held up the sign. Somehow it had gotten to be three o’clock. We had left Washington a little after eleven so we weren’t making real good time.

Neither of us had been at this entrance before. There weren’t a lot of cars and most of them seemed to be older. It felt more like a rural road rather than a highway right outside of a major city.

II
Golden Pandolia

It took more than a half hour before anyone stopped. The one that did was a small truck, sort of like a milk truck but with no markings save for a coat of weathered red paint.

The guy driving was about our age, clean shaven with an unkempt looking mop of blonde hair. He wore a red flannel shirt and denim overalls. I thought he might be a farmer, but once we got in the truck I changed my opinion. It was full of tools and what looked like car parts and big spools of wire and rope. As well there was a big disassembled table and a few boxes.

“Hey! Where ya goin’?” he said.

“North.”

"O.k! Based on the sign, I wasn't sure ya spoke English. I'm headin' up to Hightstown. I can get ya that far at least."

"Better than nothing! Thanks!" I said.

The guy's name was Garrett and he said he was a mechanic. That explained the contents of the truck.

Joe was looking at the map. "Hightstown is an hour from here."

"Not likely." Said Garrett. "Not with the condition of this road. More like two hours."

The fact was that for an interstate highway, the road was in pretty poor shape. Cracks and chuckholes everywhere, there were even weeds growing up through some of them. It looked like it had been a good ten years since the lines had been painted. There weren't a lot of other cars.

"This is the Jersey Turnpike, right?"

"Yeah, but the roads are under funded by the state."

"Looks like we'll be going through the night to Boston." Said Joe. "Can you put us somewhere good to get a ride?"

"You fellas can't do that! Come have dinner at my place. I'll give you somewhere to lay your head then you can get off in the morning."

I nodded. "That's probably a good idea. Thanks a lot."

"You're more than welcome. We love having guests! I already have some folks up for the Forth of July anyway. We're putting on a big feed all weekend. There will be plenty to go around."

I asked Garrett if I could smoke. "Sure. In fact if you could spare one I'd be gratefull."

I knocked one out of the pack and handed it to him. He looked at it curiously. "Built in filter! Pretty nice! What are these?"

"Marlboros"

"Marlboros." He repeated it slowly like he had never heard of them. "I usually smoke *Cairos*." He took a long puff and smiled. "Not bad!"

Garrett's prediction of two hours proved optimistic. We stopped for a snack and a bathroom break at a place called "Janey's Cake Hut". Where we had coffee and corn fritters (called "Johnny cake" on the menu over the grill) with honey. They tasted just wonderful. On the way out I spotted a framed photo on the wall that showed a giant dirigible of some sort. It had two parallel cigar-shaped sections and large wings. It was shown hanging in the air above some buildings and was obviously huge. The photo was old and black and white but had been hand tinted so the sky was a brilliant blue, the ground either earthen brown or grassy green and the ship itself silver and gold. There was a name painted on the side of the dirigible, *Golden Pandolia*.

The pleasantly plump black woman who ran the place noticed me looking at it. “My daddy took that picture. He was on the ground crew. He was one of the ones who saw her off the last flight!” Garrett looked impressed. I could have asked questions but I afraid the answers would delay us even more. As it was we were unlikely to make Hightstown until seven. By the time we arrived it was near sunset and there were long shadows all through the town.

I had been through Hightstown once before, but this place wasn’t as I had remembered. I thought it was a pretty ordinary middle class suburb. This place was different. The roads weren’t paved except for a couple of main streets when we passed through downtown. There was no supermarket, but the main street had separate fruit and vegetable markets, butcher shops and package goods stores as well as a general store and a hardware store, lumberyard and a place called “Maddison’s Livery Yard” that seemed to deal in both horses and cars and housed both a garage and a farrier. There were signs in the town center indicating roads to “North Field”, “Palmer’s Field”, “East Field” and “Municipal Field”.

Garret turned up the road toward Palmer’s Field. When I had seen the signs for the various fields, I had assumed in my mind that they were sports fields but as we went up the road I saw a glider coming down nearby and realized that it must be an airfield. Garret spotted the glider and said, “That’ll likely be my brother, Arliss. He likes to get up in that crazy thing whenever he can.”

Darkness was falling as they pulled up to the house. There were several other cars parked around it. On the opposite side of the street was the field, which was already in deep twilight with thousands of fireflies flashing above it. Out of the twilight came a handsome young man dressed in a grease monkey coverall. In his arms he held a little girl, maybe four years old. She was wearing a little World War One style pilot’s helmet. When she saw Garret she squealed and jumped from the young man’s arms. “Unca’ Garry!” she shouted as she ran toward him. She grabbed his leg and bounced up and down. “Daddy took me up in the glider! He let me steer!”

Garrett raised an eyebrow in the direction of the other man who grinned and shrugged.

“Fellas, this is my brother, Arliss who isn’t satisfied to risk only his own life in a crazy heavier than air contraption. The little lady attached to my leg is Astrid, my niece.”

Joe bent down and said “Hi Astrid! My name is Joe!”

The moppet buried her face in Garrett’s leg, but a muffled “Hello.” emerged.

“She’s a little shy around strangers.” Said Arliss as he shook both of our hands. He looked at us curiously. “You fellas from out west?”

Weird question. “Ya guys do look a little like cowboys.” Said Garrett. I was wearing jeans and a light blue work shirt with hiking boots and Joe was wearing a tartan flannel shirt with western style boots. I had sort of a western style hat, but we both had shoulder length hair. That ought to be enough to identify us as hippies in the eyes of most people.

“We both live in Boston. We work for a publisher. I’ve never been on a horse in my life.” I said.

Garrett chuckled good naturedly. “It’s been a long while since I was in Boston. Looks like fashions have changed.” Of course I had heard comments sort of like that before coming from straights. That was how I divided the world in those days, “freaks” and “straights”. People who looked like me represented opposition to the established way of life. Comments from straights about my appearance almost always had some perceptible layer of hostility. There was nothing like that from Garrett or Arliss. Bemusement yes, but not a trace of anger or rejection even though they seemed to belong to the traditional mainstream.

“Why don’t you fellas come in, meet the folks and have a feed.” Said Arliss.

Garrett had considerable friends and family visiting, about twenty people altogether including several kids. I couldn’t get a good count of them because they were moving too fast. A really pretty girl emerged from the group, dark hair, blue eyes and a nice figure well displayed in a modest length but well cut print dress. “Garrett! Did you bring the other table?” She asked.

“Yeah, yeah. I have it. It’s in the truck. Me ‘n Arliss will bring it in right now. Hey, this is Joe and Adam, I met ‘em on the road. Fellas, this is my sister, Gail.” With that he went back out the door.

Both Joe and me were very pleased to make her acquaintance and said so. She smiled fetchingly and asked. “Would you boys like some beer?”

We both said yes and she soon brought us both big glass steins full of foamy brown ale. It tasted wonderful, lots of complex favors. “Is this imported?” Asked Joe.

Gail laughed. “That’ll be the day. Frank Billings has a brewery in town and we do some shipping for him. He pays us half in cash and half in beer. Most of it we sell in the field side tavern. This is our field.”

“Wow! Your family runs an airport?”

"Don't make it sound *too* grand! Lakehurst or Camden or Curtiss are airports. This is a little village airfield. We don't even take motor gliders. Arliss really had to fight with Dad to buy his dumb old glider."

"Motor gliders?"

"Too dangerous, we can't afford the insurance. Do you know that if the motor cuts out on one of 'em they just fall down?"

There was a thump as Arliss and Garret muscled the big table through the front door. Having overheard Gail, Arliss said, "You're exaggerating, Gail! They're not that dangerous!"

"Oh sure! I can't believe you took Astrid up in that thing." We all stood aside as they dragged it through and set it up in the big parlor. "Looks like feed will be on soon." Said Gail. I hadn't seen any sign of a boyfriend around and I was wondering more if I would get to sit next to her than about the food.

Over dinner we got to meet Donald and Sue Palmer the parents and another younger brother, fourteen year old Robert as well as some cousins and a couple of neighbors and their kids.

Donald was a joker and he quickly dubbed me and Joe "Buffalo Bill" and "General Custer", again, just not the expected association with our long hair.

Dinner was meatloaf with potatoes and corn on the cob. We had a couple more beers and there was homemade ice cream for dessert. It was …fantastic.

Afterwards the whole group went outside and set a fire in a backyard circle of stones. Garrett pulled one of the boxes out of the van and opened it revealing, to the utter delight of the kids, several packages of firecrackers. "No sky-rockets?" Asked Joe.

"Too many gas bags around." Said Garrett

"Gas bags." I repeated flatly.

"This *is* an airfield. Hey, you want to see something? "

We both followed him into the darkened field. All we could see at this point was rhe bright circle his flashlight made on the ground. We walked about two-hundred yards and suddenly there was a big barn-like structure. "Whatzzat?"

"Just a hangar, what you want to se is inside." We went in through a side door and he clicked a switch. In the center of the room there was something that looked like a motorbike frame hanging from cables. I looked up and saw that the cables attached it to a huge finned cigar-shaped cylinder hanging in the air above it. "Boys, this is a nineteen thirty-seven Santos-Dumont Mini Titan. There aren't too many of these in fully flyable condition."

My jaw hung open. The device hanging from the cables wasn't quite a motorbike, for one thing it had no wheels and in front of a large leather saddle instead of handebars it had something like the stick from a small airplane. Below and to either side were pods that had propellers driven by chains from the chrome-embellished engine below the saddle. "Holy shit! It's a blimp! Did you build this thing?"

Garrett snorted. "You kidding? It's a classic! I restored it. Finding some of the parts took forever."

"A classic?" Said Joe. "I don't think I have ever seen a personal mini blimp before."

"It's a 'Mini Titan' and your seeing one now! Ain't she a beaut?"

"Sure is!" I said. "I've never seen anything like it!" You better believe I hadn't! Nothing like it had ever existed, I was dead certain of that. I was also becoming certain that Jersey wasn't dotted with little family owned airfields. Maybe I shouldn't say that because actually I had more doubts than certainty.

Back at the fire, Arliss was playing a guitar and singing. He had just finished one as we arrived. "Showing off your toy, Garrett?" he asked.

"It's a whole lot more sensible than yours!" Laughed Gail.

Garrett came to his defense. "Now there, show him a bit of respect. Maybe heavier-than-air never got a fair shake."

Donald slapped his knee. "Is that what you think?" he asked sarcastically. He looked at Joe and me with a grin. "What do you cowboys think, would you go up in a motor kite?"

"Oh, that's enough Pop! Hey I got a new one I just learned!" He started strumming a few chords and then went into a tune.

Some of the women looked dismayed. "Not that one! It's so sad!" Exclaimed Sue.

"C'mon Ma! I just learned it." He continued to play.

"Hey, we just was looking at that photo in the cake house today." Said Garrett.

Arliss started to sing. The song was like the saddest of Scottish ballads with just a tiny drop of the blues.

"Let me tell the sad tale of Golden Pandolia
Graceful queen of the skies.
She crossed the great oceans and over the lands
'til fate found her the day that she died.

N'er was there a ship like Golden Pandolia

She rose from the ashes of the War to end Wars,
As grand as a palace in fairytales.
From high over the Alps to the planes of Mongolia
She rode on the clouds all over the world
Like an angel on gold wings of fire."

In my mind I saw the airship in the photo from the cake house flying above a sea of clouds with distant green land peaking through tiny spaces.

"*A favorite of kings was Golden Pandolia,*
A wonder of man's hope in a new world,
The chariot of barons and presidents.
From Hawaii's volcanoes to old Anatolia,
To every land she would gracefully fly,
Like a dragon on gold wings of fire."

The others were singing along. I found Gail's face among them. Her eyes were moist. Other verses followed describing the travels of Golden Pandolia. The group showed real emotion as they sang. This was not a tale of fantasy but of history. In that regard the later verses were gripping.

"*From Lakehurst she went, our Golden Pandolia,*
Over the ocean from our fair shores,
Not a hint that her end was awaiting.
At the sunset we saw her as pink as magnolia,
A dot in the distance from Island Beach,
A glittering jewel in the twilight.

Above hidden by clouds was Continental Divide,
Unaware of the danger that waited unseen,
Her wireless ruined by a thunderstorm.
She dropped four hundred feet, struck the other ship's side,
Tore open Pandolia in one mighty thrust,
And hundreds fell from her galleries.

The great shining airship fell to the sea,
Her golden wings torn in tatters, her gas cells in flames,
Her passengers broken and drowning.
All of the five hundred sank with the debris,

Not a single one of them saw another sunrise,
There was never a chance of a rescue."

The women had tears running down their cheeks as they joined in a final verse.

My awareness was becoming foggy. I'm sure we slept that night and I'm sure Garret brought us to a highway entrance, but all I really recall was our just being there awaiting the next ride. In the new morning for the first time we had noticed that the sky had no jet contrails and great wedge shaped inflated ships hung there instead. At least I think I remember seeing that. Those were gone now as we stood on the turnpike entrance and the contrails were back, sort of. They were finer lines, higher in the sky.

III
Kandor

There weren't a lot of cars on the turnpike and what ones there were rocketed along at ridiculous speeds. The roar of their motors grew high as the approached and dropped to a low growl as the sped away. None were coming up the ramp so we decided to go up to the highway knowing it would put us at higher risk for being nailed by a state cop.

I would swear that the cars were all going over a hundred. One finally stopped and he took a quarter mile to slow down stopping far ahead of us and then backing down the shoulder. The car was brilliant crimson and sleek, almost like a stretched Lamborghini. You don't usually see sports cars with big back seats. The guy at the wheel was something else. Given the car that was no surprise. He had slicked back hair and a pencil line mustache. His green suit had lapels cut to resemble lightning bolts and they were bright yellow. He looked like a '50's Batman villain.

"What the hell does that sign say?" He asked as we piled in the back.

I said, "I have found that it doesn't matter what it says on the sign."

The guy raised an eyebrow at me in the rearview. "Ya got me there, kid! I did stop for ya after all. Where are ya heading?"

"Boston."

"I'm only going as far as White Plains, but it'll at least get ya past the city." We took off and were going ninety in only a few seconds. I was actually pushed back into my seat.

"Damn! The cops are going to pull us over for sure!" Said Joe.

The driver laughed. “Don’t be a *boze*! This road hasn’t been policed in years.” He pointed at the roof. “All they care about is what’s up there. This road belongs to collectors like me.”

I looked out the window and saw that there was a line of vehicles a few hundred feet above the road. They were not quite airplanes and not quite cars. It was like a live action scene from The Jetsons. There were a lot more of them than there were cars on the road surface. I don’t know why I got it, but I got it. “Right. You collect road cars.”

“Collect and customize! This was a Maseratti Bora until I stretched it and set ‘er up with a multi-turbine! I went coast to coast in two days with this honey!”

“Where are the blimps?” asked Joe.

“I don’t think they exist here.” I muttered.

Joe sighed.

I asked the driver, “What do you do? Whatever it is it must pay pretty well.”

“I do alright. I run the Verba Corporation. We own a fleet that gets minerals from the Belt and from Mars. Iron, cadmium, gold, rare earths, we get ‘em all. Nowadays half the world is built from materials we mine.”

“Mars.” I said. “It seems like just yesterday that a man first set foot on the Moon.”

He laughed. “Who are you kidding? You’re not old enough to remember! I was a baby myself!”

A man in a jetpack zoomed over us about twenty feet up. Our driver said “He’d better pull up before he hits a cable.”

I didn’t say anything and neither did Joe. We just stared at the sinuous jet trail he left. I finally asked, “Do *you* have one of those?”

“Nah, if I want to kill myself I have a motorcycle.”

The New Jersey Turnpike that flashed by us was not the one I had traveled a dozen times before. An absolutely huge cargo train zoomed by on a track paralleling the highway. It carried what looked like parts for a science fiction rocket ship but I couldn’t be sure. It was going at an amazing speed even compared to the car. A little farther on we saw a building under construction. The work crew were burly looking humanoid robots, their polished surfaces gleamed in the sun.

We topped a hill and a city appeared in the distance on the other side of the water. Spires over a mile high, steel, gold and a hundred colors. It had huge buildings that had high clear domes. They looked like immense tubes from an old radio. Other structures floated in the air, I have no idea by what means. There were twisting roadways that joined some of the towers a

thousand feet above the street. We were too far to actually see it, but somehow I knew those roads were crowded with busy people. Aircars swirled through the air all around them and in and out of openings in the structures.

"It's like the bottle city of Kandor, but full sized!"

"New York! Ya ever been there? What a town!"

"I was born there, but it's changed since I last saw it."

"I know what you mean. Things change so fast."

"I guess they do."

With the next turn, "New York" was out of sight. Up the Garden State we went and then across the Tappan Zee which had become simply a roadway hanging in the air. Right about there things started to feel strange.

IV
Twelve steps for Sirhan

And we stood on the roadway with our packs and our sign looking back at the Tappan Zee Bridge now complete with towers and suspension cables. A VW microbus approached and stopped right away. The folks inside were refreshingly familiar a couple of hippies, a guy and his girlfriend? He had a big "Jew-fro", the girl had long straight brown hair and a sunny smile.

The driver introduced himself. "Hey guys! I'm Leo and this is Diane. Where are you heading?"

"Boston. I'm glad to see some regular people, this was turning into a strange trip!"

"I hear ya' brother! It gets weird out there!"

"'Weird' barely describes it." Said Joe.

"Are you guy going to the big concert? I heard that Kennedy is going to be there!"

"Joe was opening his mouth to say something, but I put a finger to my lips."

"We hadn't been planning on it. Kennedy, really?"

"Humphrey is doing the Washington celebration, but he sent the vice president to Boston. You ought to go, it'll be a hell of a party! We're only going to Springfield, but that will get you to the Pike."

Diane asked, "You guys want to smoke some grass?"

Joe never smoked, but I happily accepted and soon had a warm buzz as we drove through the refreshingly familiar looking landscape. Joe nudged me and whispered in my ear "You know this isn't home, right? What about Ford?"

"Fuck Ford!" I said a bit too loudly.

"Damn right!" Said Leo, "I'll take reliable German engineering any day. You know this bus was ten years old when I bought it four years ago and it runs perfectly. I paid three hundred for it. Nothing like that comes out of Detroit."

I whispered back to Joe, "This has got to be better." I asked Leo, "So Ted Kennedy is gonna be at the Esplanade?"

"No, man. Not Ted. Bobby, the vice president."

"Oh…of course. I'm just a little stoned." I chose my next words carefully. "So you got a good price on the van. Did you get it from someone going to Vietnam?"

"No. Like I said, I only got it four years ago." So, we were out of 'Nam before '73. This was a particularly nice buzz. "Good deal." I said.

We trundled north through Connecticut and smoked another joint. Leo told me about how he played rock 'n roll and how Dianne was an artist who worked in batik. They seemed like nice folks and they lived in a nice world.

We stopped in Windsor for food. There was a Woolworth's with a lunch counter there and it looked good enough to us. Between Joe and me we had about ten bucks, but it took less than five bucks to get us each a burger with French fries and a bottomless cup of coffee! Life was good.

Diane was telling us that she was planning on working for Jerry Brown's campaign this year.

"Ha!" I said. "Do you think 'Governor Moonbeam' can get the nomination?"

"Governor what? You're confused. Brown is a senator. He won most of the primaries. He's going to get it for sure. The Republicans are going to have Rocky, but Brown will win."

"Rocky? Rockefeller?"

"Yeah, the rich bastard. He hasn't got much of a chance. His whole platform is sour grapes. Humphrey got us out of Vietnam, stabilized oil prices, got inflation under control and Rocky was there the whole time predicting doom for every move he made. He's got nothing."

I took a risk. "I'm surprised it isn't Nixon."

"He got his ass kicked by Humphrey twice. He's still seeing commies hiding under every bed. No one is interested in him anymore."

We got back on the road. Me, Leo and Diane did a few more hits leaving me in a happy haze. "I guess Sirhan quit drinking" I muttered.

"Who?" inquired Diane.

"Exactly." I said and laughed out loud.

"That's some pretty good weed, isn't it?" Said Leo.

“Best I’ve had in a while.”

V
The Age of Steam

Of course the particulars of how we ended up there were vague, but we were on an eastbound entrance to the Mass Pike. The air smelled like a distant forest fire.

There were cars on the road and they were big. The road itself was primitive looking, paved only with packed gravel that passing vehicles would kick up often in our direction. There was nothing smaller than a delivery van and several vehicles quite a bit larger than an eighteen-wheeler. The amount of smoke produced by these things, both white and black, was enormous.

We held up the sign and one of the mid sized vehicles stopped immediately. It seemed to be a truck of some sort with a long hood with several exhaust pipes pointing upward. Its wheels were huge with thick wooden spokes and knobby steel rims. It hauled a trailer about half the size of a standard cargo container. There was a loud sound of escaping gas as it braked and a huge white cloud. Steam powered!

We climbed a short ladder up to the cab. There was a woman who looked to be about fifty at the wheel. She was wearing a drab green mechanic’s coverall with the name ‘Bess” on the pocket. Her hair was wrapped in a grimy red bandana. “You boys speak English?” She asked.

“Sure.” Said Joe.

“Oh. Great. The sign was in Polish so I wasn’t sure. My son had to stay home today and I could use a stoker. How far are you going?”

I said. “Yeah, it’s not actually Polish, it’s more like….” Joe signaled me to shut up.

“Boston.” He said.

“I’m only going as far Newton, but you can get the trolley from there. Can you keep the steam up until we get there? It’s a pain in the neck for me to do it alone.”

“What do we have to do?” I asked.

“Never done it before?” She was incredulous. “That handle over there lets down the coal. Don’t pull it unless that gauge drops below the yellow

bar. That other handle is the water supply. If the water in that little tube above it drops below the red line, pull it until it comes back above, but not so much that it goes above the green line or the boil will slow too much. Got it?"

"Yeah, I guess."

The machine was noisy as hell and kind of hot. I don't know if that was characteristic of this kind of truck or it simply needed a tune up. Me and Joe took turns working the levers and while we were doing it, thanks to our inexperience, all of our focus was required to keep the two gauges properly balanced. I didn't really get much of a chance to observe the world outside of the truck. No wonder she was so happy to pick us up. I did notice that there were many stations along the road that had bins loaded with coal and huge water towers. Some of them also had wooden signs that read "EATS".

I was sweating through my shirt and dog-tired by the time we reached Newton Center.

We thanked our ride and boarded the trolley, also steam powered, and found a seat. God, we were beat! Pulling levers in that sweaty cabin for the last hour and a half had left us running on empty. The trolley was bulky and squarish, pulled by a small engine tended by two men. It was the regulation green of the Riverside line though. There was a conductor in the car that went around collecting fares. When he arrived at our seat he said "twenty-five cents" briskly. Both of us handed over a quarter and he slipped them into his changer belt without looking at them. I dozed and dreamed of an uncertain world.

VI
The Unforgotten Song

I snapped alert when I heard a voice call out "Park Street Station!" The conductor was gone and we rose to get out. Looking back at the trolley, we saw that it had the more familiar curves of the Green Line. A man got off behind us. A man in a suit with a bushy mustache and a ponytail who carried a wooden case. "Daniel?" Called Joe.

"Hello there!" he exclaimed extending his hand. "It looks like you made it alright."

"Did we?" I asked. "You tell me."

“You are right where you need to be.” He replied. “I have to be on my way now. The world never stops for a traveling man.” And he hurried off up the stairs to the Common.

We took the Red Line to Central Square and found our lives as we had left them. I was back in the world of work and hanging out with my friends. My life was simple in those days and yet full of notable events.

Neither Joe nor I talked about that trip; even to each other seeming to have a tacit agreement that we could pretend it wasn’t real. I don’t know if Joe just put it out of his mind or what and the fact is, I haven’t seen him in over twenty years and don’t know if I would feel comfortable bringing it up after all this time if I did see him. I do know that since that summer, I have seen other worlds, like and yet unlike mine and that fantasies of such imaginary places have stayed at the forefront of my imagination.

Twenty years later I was at a Fourth of July barbecue. I had my uke and was jamming with some friends. Nothing special, just a bit of song swapping. Someone had brought some obscure microbrew beer and the taste set off a memory of a full flavored draft I had had long ago. An almost forgotten song emerged in my mind and I started singing and strumming the uke.

“*Let me tell the sad tale of Golden Pandolia*
Graceful queen of the skies.
She crossed the great oceans and over the lands
‘til fate found her the day that she died.

N’er was there a ship like Golden Pandolia
She rose from the ashes of the War to end Wars,
As grand as a palace in fairytales.
From high over the Alps to the planes of Mongolia
She rode on the clouds all over the world
Like an angel on gold wings of fire.”

I paused as I tried to remember more.

A friend’s wife put her hand on my shoulder. “So sad.” She remarked. “Where did you learn that?”

“In an imaginary land called New Jersey.”

Who are the Brane Police?

My politics are unpopular. Liberals tend to think that I must be some sort of arch conservative, but I get no love from conservatives either due to my lack of respect for authority either social or civil. Being a libertarian is a tough row to hoe, particularly if one happens to be a more independent thinking one. Time and again I have had people (capital “L” Libertarians) ask me how I can possibly call myself one when I don’t own a gun. My response that I believe the right to bear arms works both ways doesn’t seem to cut it. It’s my cross to bear. The political thing has little to do with all of this except that it was the means by which I was drawn into this particular little intrigue. Bisko and I dropped out of the Libertarian party together and likewise from organized atheism. We bonded over being non-joiners.

I am close with a group of friends who all, myself included, were in our youth conveniently jammed into a random category by the rest of the world called ‘hippies’. That was based on the general scruffy look, not on some shared “peace and love” agenda. They are a group prone to idiosyncratic enthusiasms that although many found it sort of cute when we were young, to the more middle-of-the-road types seems a tad peculiar on supposedly mature middle-aged citizens. What I respect most about my particular coterie is the same thing that most people find infuriating about them, they don’t have expected responses or opinions about things and we don’t even often agree amongst ourselves so we can’t even call our little group ‘like minded’. We are mostly over educated underachievers, many with advanced degrees, others self educated dropouts. Some, but not all of us are atheists. Some, but not all are believers in a variety of faiths, often self defined. Some are socialists, Democrats, Republicans, conservatives, survivalists, or pacifists, often in unexpected combinations. I disagree with each of them about something vital and yet it is an honor to be called friend by each and every one of them.

The fact that these people are my principal contacts with the world gives me a bit of a skewed viewpoint. I tend to assume that the average person actually has taken the time and effort to have figured out a view of the world based on their own model not someone else’s. Then I remember that I am on

Earth, the planet of followers. Luckily for me my friends tend to march to the beat of a different accordionist. One such person is Myles Lancelot Biscoe jr., known to me and everyone for decades merely as 'Bisko". Bisko was a freelance scientist of no particular discipline (although officially he's a physicist) following any notion that happens to interest him. He doesn't actually work for anybody because M.L. Biscoe senior of Bisco Foods fame left him gobs of money which he spent getting a PhD in physics and his nice little house in JP plus a life in which he doesn't have to bother himself with anyone or anything he doesn't want to be bothered with. He writes occasional articles for the popular press about various pie-in-the-sky concepts but never publishes in the legitimate journals. He is a complete unknown in the mainstream scientific community and likes it that way. Like me, Bisko is reclusive. I have frequent contact with him usually video messaging between our computers, but I had not actually occupied the same room as him in over ten years. Needless to say I was surprised when he showed up at my door. I honestly didn't think he even knew where my apartment was.

When Bisko was younger, he had been prone to wearing oddball costumes, a lab coat with roller skates and a pair of x-ray specs to go with his three foot long braided ponytail, that sort of thing. These days he is lower key, at least on the outside. When he appeared at my place he was wearing sneakers, jeans and a t-shirt with a crudely rendered horse's head and the words "Shut up woman, get on my horse!" No doubt it meant something to some one, but I'll be damned if I know what that might be. In recent years he had adopted the "Moe" style bowl haircut in spite of, or perhaps because of the fact that his increasing crown baldness gave him the look of a medieval monk as a result. Who knows? His eyes darted left and right nervously as if he feared being seen.

"Bisko! Come on in! To what do I owe this rare honor?" I asked.

"Hey Ron. There's some stuff you just can't talk about over the internet." He entered my flat glancing around suspiciously.

I asked him if he wanted something to drink and he was genuinely surprised to discover that I had no pomegranate juice. He ultimately settled for a beer. He took a sip and then said. "Interesting stuff going on, interesting stuff."

"Care to be more specific?"

"Do you know how the universe came into being?"

"Um…Mighty Grongoolie pissed on the ground and all the world's oceans and rivers were created then he crapped and the fields, mountains and forests were born?"

"That's not even a real *myth*!"

"'Real myth' is an oxymoron. It's the best I could do on short notice. So you tell me; how did the universe come into being?"

"As nearly as we can tell, for eternity vast sheets of energy have existed in an endless void. They are two dimensional, but those two dimensions are not any of the ones *we* use. When I say 'vast' I mean a size that is greater than anything, bigger than the universe. Bigger than forever although 'size' doesn't mean quite the same thing on this scale."

I rolled my eyes. I hated it when Bisko attempted to dazzle me with big numbers and vast concepts. "Are you sure you don't mean '*scale* doesn't mean quite the same thing at this *size*'?"

He grimaced. "Shut up and pay attention. The sheets of energy are called 'branes. That's short for membranes. They aren't dead flat; they're rippled and crossed with waves. Thirteen point seven billion years ago ripples on two different 'branes intersected and the energy released when they crashed was the big bang that formed our universe."

"Hmmmm. This is what most scientists believe?"

"Everything has *some* controversy about it of course, but it isn't considered a radical theory." Interesting to hear Bisko say this because almost everything he believes in is a 'radical theory'.

"Alright, aside from the supposed fact that the entire universe was created this way, how is it relevant?"

"It's the universe! Isn't that relevant enough? But no, that's not the nub of the biscuit. It didn't just form our universe. It also simultaneously formed another one, a mirror universe on the other side of space. Its natural laws are the opposite of ours, its arrangement of space and time inverse. Where our universe has empty space, that one has mass and vice versa. Where ours has time, that one has inverse time."

"You mean time runs backwards?"

"Not quite. It has inverse temporal geometry."

"Um…" I just let it trail off. I am not a physicist, but I am well acquainted with the basics and I could think of so many questions about this, well let's not beat around the bush, *insane* hypothesis.

"I know what you're thinking. You're thinking this is an insane hypothesis."

"You must be psychic."

"The universe that exists beside us is a solid body of unimaginable size."

"That is actually well beyond what I or anyone would call ridiculous. If such a body could even form, which it couldn't, the gravity of it would reduce it to a singularity in short order, but it's absurd to even consider."

Bisko held up a finger. “No. No it wouldn’t if the natural laws were different. Even in our universe, gravity is far weaker than it ought to be. Compared with electromagnetism, and the strong and weak nuclear forces, it barely amounts to anything. The majority of its influence is apparently exerted outside of the three dimensions we experience. Gravity really belongs to a higher dimension out there in ‘brane land! Not only that but in the other universe it is space, not mass that exerts gravitational pull.”

I held up my hands. “Wait a minute. So what’s the point? Why is this important?”

“The ripples in the ‘branes, they haven’t stopped. The two ‘branes should have struck one another again and again over the past thirteen billion years, but where the two universes are they are somehow held apart!”

“This seems just plain nuts. How could you possibly know this?”

“I’ll show you!”

I had never seen Bisko’s current place. He bought a house in Jamaica Plane in ’89, but at the same time sort of stopped seeing people. Few people I knew had ever been out there. We drove out there in his truck. It obviously used to be an electric or cable company work van. He had it loaded with various tools and some unidentifiable gizmos along with about a hundred books. At one point he took a corner hard and about twenty cd-roms fell on me from a compartment I previously had failed to notice even existed.

The house was a triple-decker that was very well kept up and had a lovely flower bed in the front yard. “I didn’t know you were a gardener.” I said.

“I’m not really. That’s Rhonda’s thing.”

“Rhonda?”

“Yeah, you know, my wife Rhonda.”

“Hell no, I don’t know your wife Rhonda! I have known you for thirty-five years and never knew you were married!”

“Yeah. Eighteen years.”

He ushered me in. They had the whole building to themselves, but it was still broken into three separate apartments. The ground floor was tastefully furnished and decorated. In the living room a skinny woman with straight black hair that had traces of gray was painting a canvas. It was a sparse, horizonless, abstract landscape reminiscent of Yves Tanguy. Bisko said “Rhonda, this is Byron White, an old buddy of mine.”

She offered her hand and smiled. I took it and said “Everyone calls me Ron.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ron.” She seemed preoccupied. Probably didn’t like being disturbed when she was painting. I understand, I’m an artist too but I work with computer graphics, not oil paint.

We went up to the second floor. The place was jammed with machinery of all sorts. Most of it looked like manufacturing equipment reclaimed from God-knows-where there were also about a hundred computers, they looked to be about ten years out of date, all linked together on four or five metal shelves and cooled with several fans. “Where did you get all this shit?”

“Don’t call it ‘shit’. I know it all looks jerry-rigged, but rest assured that what goes on here is state of the art. All of the computers and machinery come from a cookie factory we closed.”

“Cookie factory?”

“Yeah, a cookie factory. That’s my family’s business.”

“Right, I remember.”

“But this isn’t about cookies. All around you is the VISUALIZER!”

“Wow, you managed to say that all in capital letters.” Over on the wall was a huge flat screen monitor that seemed to be the only really current piece of gear in the place. It was really large, like the size of a door turned sideways. “So what exactly does this ‘Visualizer’ visualize?”

He walked over to a fridge and pulled out a bottle and extended it toward me. “Pomegranate juice?”

“I’m cool.”

He cracked it open and took a sip. I noticed that his teeth were slightly stained from his favorite beverage. “The VISUALIZER can reconstruct the viewpoint of space in any number of dimensions. I can only display three at a time relatively undistorted.” He tapped a few keys on his desktop keyboard and the giant screen monitor came to life displaying a webwork of bright points. “This is what out universe looks like to us. You can see these dense lanes of bright points. Each of those points of light is a group of galaxies. The dark spaces between are voids, huge regions like bubbles where there is no matter, at least none we can see. The structure of the universe is like a foam of soap bubbles. Matter and the gravitational fields of matter are what makes up the thin soap film. The bubbles are expanding driving the galaxies farther apart.”

“Sure, I’m familiar with that.”

“O.k. then, let me pull back the view.” The webwork grew tighter as the image got smaller. It became something shaped like an oblate spheroid with a very thin point at the bottom narrowing down to a hair-thin connection with what looked like the surface of a lake on a dark night. Concentric rings surrounded the point where the threadlike extension touched the surface.

I leaned closer to the screen in hopes that the image would make more sense if I resolved it better. “What is that with the waves?”

“That’s a ‘brane. In this view two of our dimensions of space have been flattened so you can get a view of two more you don’t usually see.”

“Interesting diagram.”

“It’s not a diagram, it’s an actual view.”

“Impossible. You can’t put together a complete view of the universe from the outside. The speed of light doesn’t allow for a complete view like this to exist.”

“True enough, but this image didn’t come through three dimensional space or in the form of light. It’s a construction of an interference pattern, like a hologram only in many dimensions. The pattern is retrievable on many existential levels; all you need is the means to tune it in.”

“O.k. Now I see why you use capital letters to refer to it.”

“Wait. There’s more.” He typed in a few more lines and the image rotated. The drop like blob that was our universe flattened and spread out to a grey miasma and the water surface-like ‘brane swept up and around becoming a hyperbolic curve with our universe inside the curved surface. Point to point with it was an identical curve almost touching it shielding a similar spread out mass behind it. A few more key strokes and the view zoomed in to the point where the two curved ‘branes almost touched. “The object behind the other ‘brane I have named ‘Eurynome’ it is the mirror universe. What corresponds to the voids in our universe is mass in that one. What correspond to mass in ours are voids there. The laws of nature are very different there. Gravity is even weaker there than it is here and matter doesn’t organize into atoms. Elementary particles are of wildly varying sizes, some would be visible to the naked eye if they could exist here. Eurynome was formed at the exact same instant as our universe and is expanding at the same rate.”

“This is all pretty hard to believe.”

“I haven’t gotten to the hard to believe part yet.” He zoomed the image even closer and the image rotated once more. Now the view was from the side of the two ‘branes where Eurynome was. The alternate universe was a lumpy gray mass surrounded by a glowing halo to one side and the ‘brane looked like the surface of a pond seen from below. The other ‘brane was just beyond it and between…what was that? It was a curl of something, like slightly more than one loop of a coil with ends that tapered away to invisibility. “You see the object? I named it ‘Ophion’. It is three-dimensional, but not the same three we live in. It is only slightly smaller than our entire universe. I believe that it is an artificial construction.”

“Oh shut up!”

“I know it sounds strange.”

“Nuh-uh, it doesn’t sound *strange*! It would sound *strange* if you told me you had personally given birth to a full grown elephant. It would sound *strange* if you told me the great pyramid had been built by trained fleas. There isn’t a word for what this sounds like!”

“No need to get flippant. I’m not saying someone went out there with a construction crew and assembled something of that magnitude from ordinary materials. Someone, in this universe or in Eurynome, vastly more advanced than we can even dream, induced it to manifest. It is an intentionally placed obstruction that keeps the ‘branes from further collisions. If they were to strike again at the same point, both continuums would be wiped from existence! Someone set out to preserve our universe.”

“O.k. Forget about the likelihood of any of this, why have you chosen to share this information with the likes of me? I’m not a scientist. I’m an amateur scholar at best.”

“You’re an artist. I’m planning to publish on this and I need illustrations and diagrams. Don’t you see? The existence of Ophion is hard evidence of intelligent life out there! I want to find out who did this! Who are the ‘brane police?”

“Oh, aren’t you clever!” I exclaimed sarcastically. “Of course we’re assuming that what you say is true and not utter madness.”

To make a long story a little shorter, Bisko and I ended up spending some time together. The fact that he offered rather good pay for the work was definitely a factor. I inquired, delicately of course, why he drafted me for illustration tasks rather than his own wife who was also an artist. “Rhonda is a two dimensional thinker. I need someone who can see the rotation of the higher dimensional space in their mind.” I’m not sure I deserved that vote of confidence, but the Visualizer could show me the views I would need.

The Visualizer is a remarkable device, it can show the all of space and time, but the closer one chooses to examine a piece of space time, the more computing power it demands. That was why Bisko had that whole bank of networked computers, but even with all of those, he could barely resolve something as small as an individual galaxy. He insisted that the source of the images was something he referred to as “referential hyperspatial resonance”. It worked on the concept that the entire universe was reflected in many dimensions and the largest levels could be seen through the very small. It is as if a map of the whole shebang is drawn in twelve dimensions on every quark. This is what he says it’s like, but he also says it’s not really like that at all. The image is obtained by isolating a particle and feeding it enough energy to resonate within a monopolar field. Processing the detail takes a stupendous amount of computer power. The higher the detail, the more

processing power is required. It would take a Visualizer with a computer the size of Earth to visualize something as small as the Sun. Bisko makes it sound pretty simple, but I don't think his mind boggles all that easily. To me it is, in the words of Clarke's axiom "indistinguishable from magic." In truth, I didn't believe that Bisko understood entirely how it worked either, that he hadn't constructed the device based on solid theory so much as seat of the pants improvisation.

I spent a few days with the Visualizer. At even lower magnifications I saw that there were more than just two 'branes, a great deal more. The two that had spawned our universe and Eurynome were extensive and extensively convoluted occasionally dotted with other universes, some small and bright with energy shortly after their 'big bangs', others larger, darker, older. In a few of the older ones I could detect a new big bang swelling into their space, presumably destroying everything in its path. The geometry of the 'branes only looked relatively flat from certain dimensional perspectives. A slight turn and they became complex, almost flower-like manifolds with planes passing through one another. The 'branes were strung out on a surface that seemed to curve several ways at once and the concept of size just seemed to be a bad joke where I couldn't tell near from far or large from tiny. I was much more comfortable around the magnitude at which our universe was visible. That pocket of spacetime where the natural laws allowed for things like stars and human beings was referred to by Bisko as "The Aetherian Fold" or simply "Aetherium". From Earth, we cannot see our entire universe. That's because of inflation, a phenomenon that occurred soon after the Big Bang in which our universe expanded far faster than light. We cannot see farther than 13.7 billion light years because light from farther than that hasn't reached us yet. At its widest point, the Aetherian fold is forty-six billion light years across. At the very edge of our horizon we see light that originated in the first few million years of Aetherium, mad, energetic galaxies. *We* see them, but they don't exist, not anymore. The truth as seen through the Visualizer is quite clear, Our home universe is the same age all over. There are no quasars or primordial galactic clusters. Most of space throughout Aetherium looks pretty much like it does in the Milky Way. There are interesting exceptions. In a few regions there are black holes so massive that space is distorted for millions of lightyears and odd variants of physical laws hold sway as a result, not that anyone is there to appreciate it as those regions are so soaked in hard radiation that cellular life simply cannot exist, vast regions of completely sterile galaxies warped into fantastic shapes by wild gravity.

I have thus far talked about dimensions of space, but there are also several dimensions of time. Even within our own comfortable little pocket of spacetime there is more than the simple arrow of time we perceive. Our perception of time is in fact quite limited according to the data from the Visualizer. We see the effects of causality along a particular line, but in fact all effects are expressed. This is the Multiverse of M Theory, the dimension in which all possible stories of the world are told. If you rotate the view of the Aetherian Fold (or any of the pocket universes I observed) in the dimension of circumstance, something the Visualizer would allow you to simulate, it will flash like a diamond showing different sparkling realities at the slightest movement. The Visualizer allows time to be advanced or moved backward by five hundred million years or so, but the baseline is right now. I can't visualize close enough to see what these worlds are like. On the scale that I can view they are all almost identical, but the details become more diverse the closer you look. Life plays out differently and on a somewhat higher scale geology plays out differently and on an even higher one planetary formation may go differently; at least that is my surmise. Theses are all levels too small for Bisko's Visualizer to resolve. The differences I can see are slight changes in the direction and velocity of galaxies if I pay very close attention. These 'time tracks' were just as relevant to the creation of Ophion as anything and their number was huge. Those timelines were restricted to the Aetherian Fold and Ophion was equally real to all of them. It seems like a foolish understatement that looking at the universe, nay structures far bigger than the universe was a heady experience. If there is a God this must surely be his point of view, but for all it could show, the Visualizer revealed the existence of no such being. Of course any believer will tell you that means nothing.

Illustrating this was a mind bending and mind expanding task. It took over my thoughts most of the time. People attempting to converse with me found that I seemed vague and disinterested. I started missing deadlines with other illustration jobs as this one encroached more thoroughly on my life. I was now spending most of my time on Bisko's second floor. All I had over there was my laptop and a ninety-nine cent toothbrush I got at CVS. I found myself walking the streets in the dead of night muttering to myself about dimensional construction and visualizing hyper rotations. This stuff was far beyond the Möbius strips, tesseracts and Klein bottles of more conventional higher topology. Even presented in the two dimensions of the Visualizer screen, the images gave me a headache. Visions of spaces that our minds were not evolved to contain. The dreams…I'm grateful that I can barely remember them upon waking. Uncanny torqued realities inhabited by…I can

only call them spirits or even monsters. Spaces in which I would be open on several sides I have never heard of and time slips in directions that I can form no concept for. These subconscious adventures leave me exhausted from an over taxed visual imagination. Often I would awake and be back down for a nap an hour later.

Of course, even with me there in the lab, Bisko continued with his research. One morning he pointed something out to me in the Visualizer. It was the size of a small galaxy just at the edge of decent resolution on the far side of our own universe. He was able to enhance the image and called me over for a look. “Check this out, it looks like a ruin of some sort!”

“Waddya mean a ‘ruin’?”

“You know, like a building that has fallen into utter disrepair.”

“It’s a galaxy!”

“I don’t think so. I think it is the remains of a huge artificial construction. Look, that part there.” What he pointed to looked like a fine threadlike line. It was visible at this magnification so it must have been at least as wide as a large star and hundreds of light years long! There were several of them although some looked broken. They looked as if they had once formed a symmetrical radial pattern but many of them had moved out of line over time. How much time? Millions, maybe billions of years? There were also bulkier shapes impossible at this magnification to really make out. The idea of this assemblage being natural seemed implausible.

“Nobody could build something like that, nobody. I don’t care if they have been civilized for a billion years!”

“Look how far we have come in six-thousand. What if it was someone, some intelligent race, who made all the right choices? Non-warlike, utterly cooperative, perhaps telepathic. Imagine super-intelligent termites and then give them millions of years to learn technology. What do *you* think they might eventually build?”

“Bah! Collectivists. How could a society like that survive long enough to do something like this?”

“It might not be that hard if they’re not crazy oversexed monkeys.”

“Hmph. What exactly do you think it is?”

“I can’t even guess, but I think that any civilization that could build Ophion would have to be able to build something like *that* first.”

It *did* look like a ruin. Whatever it was it had been abandoned for a long time. “How old do you think it is?”

“A billion years minimum, probably a *lot* more. Whoever made it must have been long gone before there was life on Earth.”

“You don’t think that a civilization that powerful couldn’t have preserved itself?”

“If they could build that and build Ophion, and I believe that they did, then they could also build an entire new universe perfectly suited to themselves. Eventually we may turn it up with the Visualizer. They became powerful enough that they escaped into a world of total artifice, every level of its nature completely under their control.”

“Don’t be shy Bisko, think big!” I said sarcastically.

“Mockery doesn’t suit you, Ron. Think, why would anyone invest as much as it must have taken to build such a thing as that?”

“It would have to be pretty important.”

“Wouldn’t it though.”

All this just seemed bizarre. How much would a civilized race do to survive? It kind of brings into question how much survival is worth. To build something like whatever that ruin is must have required the entire resources of a civilization, probably many civilizations. If this was the device for creating Ophion then it could be argued that they were saving an entire continuum rather than just themselves but it still would have been an astonishing act of altruism.

Bisko continued. “We do know one thing, something changed in the universe about five billion years ago. Something started driving the expansion of space faster. The way it looks right now, the universe will go on expanding forever. Before the change, we were going to only expand so far and then it was all going to start falling back in on itself, but there was likely to have been a second big bang by then. Actually, it probably wouldn’t have been only the second. We have no idea how many trillions or quadrillions of years this has been going on.”

“Do you think the ruin has something to do with the sped up expansion?”

“It seems likely. The creation of Ophion too. It’s all linked. The beings who did this were unimaginably powerful and likely ruthless beyond all conception. Suppose this was the wrong thing to do. Could you imagine anyone convincing them of it once they had made their minds up?”

Bisko finished his paper which was really just a general introduction to the concepts. I fully expected it to be laughed off by the scientific community. At the end of the day it sounded like just another crackpot theory, granted one with a huge scope.

To the best of my knowledge Bisko was having a hard time getting the paper published in a reputable peer reviewed journal. He started a website with a slightly dumbed-down version of it which got plenty of response from non-scientists and ultimately started attracting reporters, mostly from

tabloids, to his door. After the paper was complete I actually took to hanging out with Bisko and Rhonda sometimes.

I had taken to calling Rhonda “Madame Bisko” which she found amusing. Rhonda was a fairly fascinating woman. Yes, she was a painter but she was also a sculptor, but of a strange sort. She made sub-miniature sculpture that needed a microscope to view them. Her proffered medium was grains of polished white rice. Her tools were amazing, tiny motors powered rasps made on the tips of needles with super glue and the finest cerium oxide powder. She performed this labor with the work held in a tiny clamp under a stereo microscope. Her subjects were usually reproductions of the very largest monuments. My favorite was of the Lion of Beaufort. Through the microscope, it looked like it was carved from the finest ivory. She had been working on the Taj Mahal and that promised to outdo it until she accidentally broke one of the towers, so she put it aside and made the Burg Kalifa instead. She also had a deformed dog, a dachshund that was born without legs named Prince Radian. In spite of that he was a jolly little fellow who slinked around the downstairs living room like a caterpillar panting and wagging his tail. He barked like a fool whenever the phone rang. She had to hold him up by his tail to when she took him out to poop or he would make a horrible mess. Bisko met her through a mutual friend who became convinced they belonged together because they were both obsessive geniuses. I would have thought that to be a recipe for disaster but they apparently hit it off immediately and claim to have never had a fight.

Between her, Bisko and the worm-dog, things were plenty entertaining so I was happy to be a frequent dinner guest. During a Sunday dinner there was a knock on the door. Bisko *never* had guests just drop in. Anyone who knew him knew better. Madame Bisko went off to answer the door leaving Bisko and I at the table. We sort of forgot about her until we realized that ten minutes had passed. Bisko called out “Hey Rhonda! Who is it?”

She called back “Easier if you just come and see.”

We got up, Bisko being sure to take his pomegranate juice, and headed for the foyer.

It stood in the foyer under the light casting no shadow. It *was* a shadow, a three dimensional shadow. Not shaped like a human. It was hard to see what shape it actually was. Highly irregular. It was defined by absence. You think you can’t see air, but you can see where it is not, Perhaps not the air itself, but its accompanying dust and moisture and other marginally visible things suspended in it and there was a definite and clear region where those things were not. Madame Bisko was having a conversation with it, this something that could not be seen but took up space. As we approached she turned to us

and said, “This…um… presence calls itself ‘The Agent’.” She seemed surprisingly calm.

The Agent spoke. The voice was peculiar; there was no attack to the sound, the phonemes faded in and out. It was halfway through its first sentence before I started to understand the words. “…to you. We threaten no action but wish only to advise.”

“What was that again?” Asked Bisko.

“The Agency is not a danger to you. We threaten no action but wish only to advise.”

“What Agency might this be? I assume you haven’t come to sell me insurance.”

“Sell…no.” The shape of the thing seemed to alter slightly and it moved toward me and Bisko. The floorboards creaked a bit. Evidently this transparent being had mass, at least as much as a person. “Advise.”

I spoke up. “About what?”

“The information. The information about the Veils of Division. It is of no utility, can not be focused into relevance.”

“What in the name of God’s balls are you talking about?”

The voice swelled like a church organ. “The name you give, Eurynome.”

Bisko’s eyes grew wide. “Eurynome! Are you *from* there?”

There was the a sound of rushing wind then the voice again. “What is from there cannot come here. This agent is not a person. This agent is a…device. Created here.”

“Some kind of robot.” I said.

The Agent’s voice again came like an incipient storm. “Allow me to convey the message, my duration is short.”

Bisko held up a hand for quiet. “Continue.” He said.

The voice came with the chaotic rhythm of water tumbling over rocks. “There is no utility, the work has been completed. The...Ophion…met its purpose before your world was formed. They who brought it into being still persist, but you will never find them. They are …more…than you. More than you are capable of becoming. Beings like you cannot effect nor can you understand. Nothing you will ever do can be significant in our…sphere.”

Bisko looked slightly indignant. “How do *you* know what we can become?”

The voice swelled from all around. “…we know…” The being came closer to Bisko. I sensed that it was minutely examining him. “We have given you profound consideration…respect…in even discussing this subject. We honor you for merely learning to see us at all, but you will see no more.”

I couldn't help but give a short bark of a laugh. "Give it up, Bisko." I said. "As far as it's concerned, you're a bacterium that momentarily opened its eyes and saw its world. Not comprehended, just saw. You get an 'A' for effort, but nothing more."

The being, call it a ghost if you must, was taking up less space now. "The message has been conveyed." The three of us stood staring at empty air that contained no special presence at all.

After about thirty seconds Rhonda said, "Dinner will be getting cold."

Over the next few days Bisko and I discovered that the Visualizer no longer seemed to work. No amount of jiggering with or replacing the sensors, no amount of cleaning up the software, nothing would bring it back online. "It's like the whole natural law that allowed it to work is no longer in effect! This is weird as shit!" He even went so far as to get together a whole other battery of computers, but it was just a waste of his time.

Bisko still occasionally gets interviewed for shows on the Mysterious World network which is full of shows about Chupacabras and UFOs. They like him because he both sounds intelligent and looks looney. I actually got a really good paying art job for an article in Science Illustrated debunking the whole thing. Bisko was pissed at me for that, but it kept me in good scotch for a while.

"Do you think that's what happened?" I once asked him.

"What?"

"Do you think that the guys who the Agent worked for actually altered nature so the Visualizer couldn't work anymore."

"That was a bunch of crap. No one could do that."

"When in doubt, there's always denial."

"Shut up."

Eternal: a monologue

Hello son, it's good to see you again. Good to know you're well. I miss you and Eileen. I especially miss the kids, even the one who wasn't born yet when I was dying, little Emily. Of course I know your mother is still carrying on. I know it's a bit strange for you with me being dead and all. I came to tell you what it's like, not that it will do you a speck of good to know. I mostly want to put your heart at rest. I watched you pray at my bedside, and no matter how rudely I told you to knock it off, you kept it up in hopes that I would be "born again" in my last days.

I know we had some conflict about this. I was a lifelong atheist and I know you went and got religion after you got out of college. I'm sure you must be tickled to think that I was wrong. Well, I may have been wrong, but you weren't right either. For one thing I'm not in Hell, I'm in Heaven. I denied all my life the existence of any God or angels or any of that "crap" as I was fond of calling it and yet here I am in Heaven. Chances are you will eventually join me here, but not because you accept Jesus but because you are a decent, compassionate man.

There may be a Hell, but I have never seen it. The only evidence we have of its existence is the absence of a huge number of people, the majority of people who have ever lived aren't here.

I ought to tell you how I got here. I left you behind on Earth about two years ago. You remember, I'm sure, how it was with me. They didn't catch the tumor as soon as they might have liked, but the doctors didn't feel I was hopeless at first. It just dragged on and on and I had less and less energy especially after the chemo. I think I knew my number was up when I was told that new rounds of treatment were more likely to do me harm than good and they started talking more in terms of "management" than "cure". The management became more about pain than anything else. I know I must have seemed like I had just plain lost my mind in those last days, but the truth is I was just high as a kite. I wish I could tell you what dying was like but my awareness was almost nonexistent at the crucial moment. I'll tell you this much, I don't remember traveling down a tube or seeing a bright light. Some of us here did, but not me. We think that stuff has more to do with the brain shutting down than it does with coming here.

I was “born” into Heaven. I didn’t come out of a woman, but what took place was a birth. There are no adults or children here our bodies are all the same age, or rather possess the same agelessness. Anyway, I didn’t stride through a pearly gate; my body coalesced out of spacetime as I was drawn through a sort of borderland and came to its final form here. I have two arms, two legs, a head, eyes, ears a nose a mouth and my body seems solid. There is nothing ghostly about me. I know I look different to you, both insubstantial and sort of what I looked like when I was in the world, but here in Heaven I’m as corporeal as I was in life.

The first thing I noticed when I got here was that my head was utterly clear. That last month I was so drugged that I barely felt I was part of the world. Now suddenly I was totally present and aware. I also had perfect vision, my nearsightedness was gone.There were others with me, but I was more focused on myself. I had no expectations. When you get here there is absolute certainty that it is no illusion. You know that you are in the afterlife. That knowledge is hardwired in as part of the birth here. I looked at my hands. They were human, but sort of perfected. Everyone had a little bright square of light floating somewhere near them, I’ll get to them soon. My skin was an even dark tan and free of hair. I reached up and touched my head, no hair there either. That absence was nothing compared with what I discovered when I reached between my legs. Just smooth skin there, nothing sticking out. Let me assure you, there is no sex in Heaven. There isn’t even any going to the bathroom in Heaven. There were no openings south of the border at all. I am told that the look on my face upon making this discovery wasn’t as comical as some, but everyone is at least a bit surprised at that discovery. I was nude, but the people around me had clothing, some of it quite colorful. The styles were highly individual. That’s a good thing because there is a great lack of distinguishing physical characteristics here. People don’t vary in height by much, no one has any hair or beard. No one has any physical defects. No one is overweight or underweight and no one is either immature or old. There are no primary or secondary sex attributes. No beards, no breasts, no nipples. There are racial characteristics, but skin color is in a much narrower range. No one is either very light or very dark. You take away all of those factors and it will amaze you how similar humans all look. Yes, we are all still human. No halos. No wings.

One thing. Everyone in Heaven is feeling pleasure all of the time. I mean physical pleasure. It’s hard to describe, almost like sexual pleasure except that it isn’t actually sexual. The sensation does swell into something akin to orgasm when people come together to enjoy one another’s company.

Sometimes you will hear people gasp or moan just from the joy of being together.

There is no pain here. None. All humans are bothered throughout their days and even when they sleep by pain. Even very healthy humans feel little aches and pains all the time, constantly. In Heaven we do not. Many of us don't notice it until we have been here a while because we died in pain and relief from that sort of masks the fact that we are feeling no pain at all. If we damage ourselves we heal within minutes. If something truly catastrophic happens, we find ourselves being born again. It hasn't happened to me, but I'm told that after a few centuries here you tend to start taking it for granted. Just the same, I still am pretty careful and haven't gotten more than a little cut since I've been here. That natural sense of caution is fading away though. We also have no fear. I don't mean that we are all terribly brave; I mean we have no fear. We have no physical reaction to perceived danger, no quickening of the heart, no adrenalin rush. If I were to jump out of an airplane with a parachute it would merely be to get a pleasant view from above. To people on Earth we here in Heaven might seem terribly remote and even bland. We don't need sleep either although most of us do sleep from time to time. One tends to do it less and less the longer they are here.

I know you want me to get to the part about God and angels. I will, I promise, but let me say a few other things first. The first person I met and spoke with was Beck. Christian Beck was born on Earth in Holland in 1796. He had been a tenant farmer. I knew this before we spoke. Everyone here knows the identity of whomever they meet, at least their name, dates and country of origin and frequently a lot more. It's just a part of being here. There are no total strangers in Heaven. Anyway, Beck was the first guy I met and we understood one another perfectly. It took me a little bit to tumble to the fact that I wasn't speaking English. There is a Heavenly language, also built in. I never learned it, I just know it.

Beck said, "There now. Welcome. I know things must seem strange."

"To say the least." I looked around. Heaven is flat, it has mountains and valleys, rivers and seas but it's not on a round planet. It's flat and it goes on forever. That's not a metaphor. Forever. Where I was there was a town. It is called Lindo. I just knew that too. It was made up of a cluster of buildings that were sort of in a southern European style. There were vehicles in the streets, wooden horse-cart-like affairs although there were no animals. They were self propelled although at the time I didn't know what drove them. They made no motor noise. There are animals in Heaven but none of them are used as beasts of burden nor are any killed and eaten. There are us, the Residents and there are the Angels. "Nice little town." I said.

“We are fond of it.” Said Beck with a smile.

So anyway, Lindo is the town where I was born and there was a house there for me. Beck lives right next door and serves as sort of my guide. Everybody has a person like this for their first couple of years. He tells me that when I have been here for about a century or so I will start occasionally serving in this capacity also. Everybody does it, it’s like military service. There was clothing in my closet that was exactly to my taste. I have discovered that if at some point during the day I wish that I had a certain item of clothing, it will be found in my closet the next day. I have yet to learn exactly how that works.

The house across the street from me is occupied by a woman named Penny Singleton. We have become close friends. Penny died in 1935 in Kansas of scarlet fever at the age of 32. Like everyone else she has no hair, nor does she have breasts or genitalia but she does have a pretty face and a sunny personality. On Earth, she was one of those positive happy folk who never seemed to be brought down. Take a person like that and put them in Heaven and there is just no stopping them. There are flowers in Heaven and she seems to grow every variety. She also dreams up amazing foods.

There is day and night here although there is no sun. There is light that comes from the sky that shines down for about sixteen hours and then dims to about half strength for eight hours. It always feels like early summer. We get rain, but not torrents usually and once in a while brief thunderstorms. There are no damaging winds or floods. On any given day a person could walk about perfectly nude and be comfortable, but only a few do. There is no need for modesty here, but clothing is an important means of self expression and most take advantage of it.

I thought that I would miss the things that happened below the waist, not just the sex, but also the processes of elimination. When I was alive I valued toilet time as little moments to myself. At certain times in my life, it was the only time I would get any reading done. Now I could never go back to any of it. In retrospect it all seems like a messy, smelly unsavory business. I can’t believe that I did that stuff for sixty-seven years and I couldn’t imagine wanting to go back to doing it. Who needs smelly stuff oozing out of you? We don’t need to reproduce. There is still great pleasure to be had from physical contact with one another; we just don’t require dedicated organs for it.

Strangely, we *do* eat although not as much as the living and only for pleasure usually socially. We get foods the same way we get clothes and some of us have remarkable imaginations. The other night Penny brought over something that had strange fruits and nuts with a miniature pink rain

cloud hanging over it lightly sprinkling it with syrup. Food and drink goes down our throats to our stomach where it will sit for a while giving us great pleasure and then it is no longer there. I'm sure that someone here understands the mechanism, but not me. Nobody cooks. Foods are imagined and appear full blown. They can even include meats in spite of the fact that Heavenly animals can't be killed. Where the meat comes from is another of Heaven's mysteries.

I met my first angel when I had been here for two hundred days. There are a couple of things that new residents do. They are taken on tours of some of the interesting places in Heaven and each of us gets to ask questions of an angel. It's a little tricky describing an angel. They have no fixed size or shape and they have more than three dimensions. They do have what looks like wings…sometimes. An angel kind of emerges from a piece of air and flutters around. They don't exactly talk but just kind of make you aware of their thoughts. Their ideas just sort of appear in your mind, but you know you didn't just think 'em up yourself. You get used to it. I asked mine how many of his kind could dance on the head of a pin. No surprise that he had heard that one before. In case you were wondering, the answer is all of them. I also asked if Jesus was real. He referred me to the Great Book.

The Great Book is a truly amazing thing! It's like an encyclopedia, a museum and the internet but it is also an intelligent thing. Every resident has one. I shouldn't have compared it to the internet because it will give you the completely wrong idea. It is usually just a little square thing that is near you. It's never more than about three feet away, but it's never in your way. If you reach out and touch it, it expands to whatever size you visualize in your head and will display information in words and three dimensional pictures with sound and motion. It is news, it is knowledge and it is communication. The level of detail in an answer to a question is dependent on how much you want to know.

Anyway, I asked about Jesus. I don't even know why. I never gave a hoot about Jesus when I was alive, but he just seemed like someone I ought to know about. Well it turns out that he lives a couple of thousand miles away and is known to his friends as "Yesh" these days. As you might imagine, he's a big celebrity but in the last few centuries he has taken to being somewhat reclusive. Since the modern age began, the population of Heaven has skyrocketed along with the population of humans on Earth and lots of the new residents are Christians. Apparently some of these people have really hounded Yesh quite a bit and long before I ever got here, hundreds of years ago in fact, he finally said "enough already!" Yesh now lives in a little town populated by people who were Roman era Jewish folk when they were

on Earth. He absolutely refuses to talk to any Christians at all. He doesn't hate them, but he just can't be what they all seem to want him to be. Yesh is just a resident like everyone else and he has been here a long time. He barely remembers his life on Earth and he sure as hell doesn't care to think too hard about how he left it. To him and all long time residents, remembering life on Earth is a lot like one of the living remembering life in the womb. It just doesn't seem that important. He is no closer to God than any of us, but that doesn't mean he isn't a good guy. I sent him a message and he said he would be happy to meet me if I was ever out his way. It's one highly unexpected way being an atheist pays off, I get to meet Jesus.

I looked up God. Yes, there is one. God is seen from time to time and sometimes even deigns to converse with residents. God is even more remote in form and concept than the angels. I can tell you this much, God *did* create your universe and also Heaven. How and when that happened the Creator has never told anyone, but I can tell you this much; so far as God is concerned the "Big Bang" was strictly a local phenomenon and all of creation is far larger in both space and time. Humans are not even close to figuring out how the whole show works. That goes for humans in Heaven as well as on Earth. The angels, the Great Book and God all say that is not knowable by humans.

I took my tour. Heaven is full of some amazing wonders. About five hundred miles from my town is a city of one hundred million people. It's about the size of Montana. Some of the buildings are of breathtaking size. If they had been built on Earth, their tops would be in the stratosphere, literally thirty miles high! Hear, of course, the air goes up forever at the same pressure and the land isn't curved so we can see them from a thousand miles away. There is a canyon so deep that if you were to jump into it you would fall for an hour before you hit bottom. People love to parachute there or ride hang gliders. It's such a long ride that people have been known to fall asleep on the way down. The Great River is three hundred thousand miles long and as wide as an ocean. There are water Titans that live in it miles long. It flows in a constant torrent. There are rapids where it tumbles over rocks the size of mountains making a roar that vibrates you to your very soul. There is a sport of trying to cross it in wooden ships. Even knowing that you can't permanently die here it still seems terrifying. The fifty mile high Barricade Wall was built millennia ago by the angels. It was supposed to temporarily contain an ocean that they eventually moved. Yes, the angels can move entire oceans. The residents asked them not to remove it when they were done because it could be climbed and a person can see for thousands of miles from its top. It is only the second largest structure in Heaven. I didn't

go to see the largest up close. Beck assured me that the view from a hundred miles away was the most spectacular. It is a statue of a nude man (of the Heavenly sort) holding a globe of the Earth in his outstretched hand and studying it with interest. Beck told me that just the globe was twenty miles in diameter and it sat in the man's palm at about the scale size of a basket ball. The Rainbow Fields are a region where crystals grow from the ground covering an area of about five hundred acres. They refract spectra on the clouds that hang above in ever shifting patterns. We went to the Party. It's called The Party because there isn't another like it. It has been going on for three centuries. It was nonstop games, wine, food, dancing and good conversation with some of the greatest wits who ever lived. I met George Gershwin and Franz Liszt within a minute of arriving! I discovered that some of the people had been there since the party started. I could only stand to stay a day but resolved to return later. After all, I have eternity.

Beck took me on my tour in an airplane that worked the same way that Heavenly cars do which is they just do. That's what I decided to do with myself in Heaven, at least for now. I have been building cars. An engine will function if it is intended to. The most common design is a simple flywheel made of heavy wood set on the axle internally. You build a steering mechanism for the wheels and whatever kind of body you want. When you get in it and it goes when you want it to and slows down or stops when you want. The airplane worked the same way. The rules are just different in Heaven.

I mentioned that there are animals here. There are flying things sort of like birds built on more or less the same plan as the people without sex or elimination. There are also beasts in the fields and forests, some are quite large but none are dangerous. They are not like Earth animals. They have varying numbers of legs and eyes. They all can talk although most are not all that interested in talking to humans. One place Beck took me was the Land of the Titans. The Titans hare huge creatures. Many of them are as big as skyscrapers. They have their own society and speak to each other on deep booming proverbs that can be heard from many miles off. They will speak to humans if a human can get one to notice him, but we are literally the size of ants compared to them. They can be seen all over Heaven, but in their land there are thousands of them.

On the way back to Lindo, my home town, I asked Beck to take me to visit Yesh.

Yesh was pleased enough that I had come to visit but was suspicious of Beck just because of his name. I agreed to find my own way home and sent him on his way.

Let me tell you, son, he's good guy. He barely remembers his life on Earth. He has lived more than four-hundred times as long here as he did there. The Great Book has a full biography of him though. He was the bastard son of a girl who a local man made an honest woman of. He believes that his biological father was a soldier in Herod's army. He became a carpenter like the man who raised him but the priests interested him in esoteric texts which he went off to study with scholars who lived in the desert. He came away from that with the idea that his people needed to find pride in themselves. They had an ancient tradition that could serve them well even under Roman rule. The Romans could rule the land, but the Jews didn't have to become Roman! The politics of the situation got the better of him and he ended up offending the wrong people. Those people, who understood far better than him how to use their current political situation, used the Romans to get rid of him. It was neither the first nor the last time something like that had happened. Itinerant preachers were always pissing off the local priesthood in those days.

All the big stuff happened after Yesh was already here. He told me that he first got wind that something was up after he had been here for a hundred years. That was the first time he met someone who called himself a Christian. He was baffled by the stories he told and the things they said about him. Later he met people who had lived their lives believing that he himself was God! To Yesh it was almost impossible to understand how someone could believe such a thing. Part of it must have been that the Romans got worse and worse. More arrogant, more decadent but most startling and troubling, the people who were his followers eventually *became* the Romans! It was around then that he started to become leery of contact with Christians. His life was here now and he didn't even think too much of his life on Earth. When he started serving as a guide, he never worked with Christians. Like me, he was interested in making cars and also furniture. He is a very learned scholar and spends a great deal of time with the Great Book.

Yesh also had some questions for me. "Michael", He asked "You lived in a Christian land and were raised by a Christian family. How is it that you were an unbeliever?"

"With all due respect", I said, "It didn't make any sense. The Christians wanted us to live a certain kind of life and wanted to enforce their agenda with fear of damnation. That you may have had some good ideas about how we should treat one another wasn't good enough, you needed the authority of God or you were worthless. It's not only insulting to the intelligence, it's insulting to you!"

Yesh nodded. “That has been part of my take on it. It has been so frustrating that I even discussed it with God who offered to change my identity, make me a New Soul. I came this close to saying yes. Ultimately I decided that this too shall pass, that eternity is a long time and everyone will forget in a million years. I want to be me. I have been here a long time and you will be too. You’re right, setting a man up as God to enforce your own power doesn’t make sense. People on Earth don’t make sense. It’s only when we get here that making sense starts to make sense.”

It was convoluted, but I sort of understood. He had had a long time to think about this. Yesh was wise on Earth but is wiser in Heaven. I stayed a few days with him and we built a car together for me to drive home in.

Eventually I’ll have to look up Mohammed and the Buddha as well and see what they have to say. There is no religion in Heaven, but these people still have insight to provide. But they aren’t the only ones.

A little less than ten percent of the people who have ever lived are here. We don’t know where the absentees are. They might be in “Hell” if there is one. If such a place exists, I’m certain that it differs as much from popular conceptions of Hell as this place differs from the common ideas about Heaven. As I said before, this is a place for the righteous. Decent people who respected their fellow man, were not generally mean or petty, were kind and helpful. There are exceptions. There are people who killed here and people who stole things, these are mostly soldiers or people who were in extremity when they committed their crimes, but there are even some people who did utterly terrible things, multiple murder, brutal rapes or other acts of insanity. They are not the ones who did these things out of selfishness, but those who were victims of mental disease. Here of course, they are healed of all infirmity. They along with those who were feeble-minded usually remember little or nothing of their Earthly life. People who died as infants are also in this group as are late term abortions and miscarriages. We call them “New Souls” and when they are born here they are like infants. New Souls have in some cases formed their own communities and cultures. They don’t have the baggage of having been human and don’t understand the human experience intimately. They usually don’t have the same names they had on Earth. The New Souls are Heaven’s “natives”. This is the only world they have ever known.

There are very few religious leaders here. I checked in the Great Book. There are only six popes in Heaven, only a couple of Archbishops of Canterbury, just one Dali Lama, *not one* major protestant evangelist. Mohammed himself is here, but not many Ayatollahs. There is no religion

either favored or disfavored over another so far as representation here is concerned. There are Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Quakers, Pagans and everything else you can imagine. There are plenty of unbelievers here too, in fact a considerably larger segment of the population here are atheist (or rather *were* atheist) than on Earth. Religion per se doesn't seem to be a factor. Being religious won't get you in, but abusing power or leadership will most definitely keep you out. There are billions here and not one of them is a kiddie-fiddling priest.

There are quite a few lawyers here and I'll just tell you they tend to be rather insulted when you are surprised at that fact. *Two*, count 'em, just two American presidents are here and I'm just going to let you guess which two they are. I'll give you a hint, neither one has his face on money. They can be consoled by the fact that there are many countries that have not a single head of state here. Senators and congressmen are rare as hen's teeth as well.

Here in Heaven we talk a lot about karma. It's not a term I used much during my life on Earth, but here we see it as the key of entry. Karma is a secret sort of thing. We often don't know what karma our fellow humans are carrying around, but once we get here we start to get a clue. It's no surprise that Hitler isn't here or Idi Amin. No Tamerlane, no Attila the Hun, no Vlad the Impaler.

Son, you know who else *isn't* here? Gandhi isn't here. The great Mahatma! None of the residents know why not and the angels aren't tellin'. The Great Book has only information on his Earthly existence. Socrates isn't here. Mother Theresa isn't here. Albert Schweitzer isn't here. Mister Rogers isn't here. What do you suppose would have kept *Mister* ***freaking*** *Rogers* out of Heaven? Truth is I don't want to know.

Ya'know who *is* here? Genghis Khan. You know who else? Howard Hughes. I would have figured him for having really screwed up karma, but he's here.

I guess you wonder how it is that I can come and talk to you. All over Heaven there are special places that are sort of three dimensional borders between this world and yours. They are the places where we are born into heaven but we can also step back a little bit over the threshold. Not all the way. We can't return to life and we wouldn't want to. Your world is pain, but we can for a while see and sometimes be seen. It takes discipline and most of us who do it just get disoriented and start doing or saying peculiar things. That's why ghosts have historically been so obscure. Actually most of the ghosts that people on Earth see are people on their way into the afterlife still experiencing death. Ones like me who have been here a while are more rarely seen. Humans can't see my Heavenly form so your brain

provides an image that resembles me when I was alive. I see you a little differently too depending on how I am thinking of you at the moment. In this conversation I have seen you as a baby, as a boy and as a man depending on my own particular thoughts. I see a kaleidoscope of viewpoints in time.

There is something that I have to bring up. You know who needled me even more than you about salvation? Your mother, that's who. Kate would always give me a sad look when she went off to church on Sunday, especially when she was taking you when you were a boy. Sometimes, not all that often, about twice a year or so, we would be lying in bed before drifting off and she would say, "It pains me that you won't be with me in Heaven, Michael. I hate the idea that I will have to go through the life eternal without you by my side." I never knew what to say to her. It wasn't like I perversely rejected belief in God and Jesus, I saw no evidence for it. She talked about Heaven quite a lot, about how we are rewarded for our deeds with eternal milk and honey. You know another bunch of people who aren't here, and I think they may account for most of those missing; the people who felt compelled to be good people because of the reward of Heaven or the threat of Hell. People who acted good and kind because they were filled with fear of what might happen if they don't, not honoring their fellow man just because it was the right thing to do. I just worry about your mother because she talks about the reward so much and maybe not enough about just having compassion. The way she talks about the other church ladies behind their backs. The way she yells at the grocery boy. I just worry, that's all. I wouldn't go telling her that you talked to me. Probably better if you didn't share that with anybody really. But tell your mother that karma comes from acting as a gentle, compassionate person for its own sake, because it makes you feel right inside to do so. I know what you're thinking, "Heaven *is* a reward, so why is there a reward if our concern is simply living a good and compassionate life?" It would really tick me off if someone just told me that the mind of God is unknowable, but that's all I have to tell you! Believe it or not once you get to Heaven there are even more of these answerless questions than there are on Earth. I want your mother to be here. She wouldn't be my wife here like she was on Earth, we don't join in that way, but she is my best friend and this is a good place. Help her be the person she has to be to get here.

Son, I have to go. I will bother you no more, but seek me out when you are here. Not all fathers and sons know each other here, I mean blood relationships don't mean too much in the hereafter. Do you have any idea how many generations are here? You and I, we didn't see eye to eye on a lot of things but we had a rapport, especially when you were young we would

go fishing or fly a kite and just talk about nothing and everything for hours at a time. We didn't do it for years and years after you went off to college until that one weekend after I was diagnosed. It was the last time that I felt tolerably decent enough to go off fishing for a day and, much to my surprise and delight, you asked to come. You seemed nervous at first, like you had forgotten how to talk to me but you relaxed and suddenly it was like we had been in that place all along.

We didn't catch anything that day so I suppose it doesn't matter that we can't catch fish in Heaven, they won't go after bait, but we could still fly a kite together. You ought to see how high they go here!

The Aruf Cycle

Children of Aruf

23. Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden to till the ground from whence he was taken.

24. And the dog, Aruf, appealed to Lord. "Oh lord, May I too journey from the garden with Adam, for I am his true companion and he shelters me and I am his friend. Beyond the garden I shall guard him and keep him."

25. And the Lord replied, "You have not sinned against me and still you may have a place in paradise. Why should you wish to suffer pain and death and the travails of the accursed?"

26. And Aruf replied, "The man and all his generations shall need of my loyalty and my trueness to remind them of your loyalty and your truth."

27. And the Lord God said unto Aruf, "So it shall be that you and your generations shall walk by the side of man and his generations, and I shall let you and your generations continue to have sensible speech when all other four footed beasts shall not, so that a righteous voice shall always be heard in the world.

28. So he drove out the man and the dog walked by his side. And he placed at the east of the Garden of Eden Cherubims and a flaming sword which turned every way to keep the way of the tree of life.

-Genesis, chapter 3

Garf slept by the stove. He neither kicked nor whined nor did any of the things that so many dogs tended to when unconscious. His was the sleep of the innocent. Had Jack not known him so well, he would have been tempted to take his pulse.

The dog stirred, stretched and raised his head. "Gotta pee, Jack." He mumbled. The dog got up stretching and yawning.

Jack was at the table cleaning his brushes. "So who's stopping you?"

"C'mon, Jack, I want you to come out with me. It's a beautiful day."

"Garf, who leads the pack?"

Garf bowed his head slightly. "You do, Jack."

"So just go pee then."

Garf walked toward the door, tail hanging down. He turned back. "Jack?"

Jack looked up from his work again. "Yes?"

"C'mon out. Please?"

Jack knew Garf wouldn't let up until he went with him. He tossed his brushes in the can of turpentine and started putting his shoes on.

When they got outside it was hot and humid and it had rained that morning. Even to Jack's human nose, the air was redolent with redolence. Garf whirled around. "Wow! So much….*everything*!" Jack envied Garf's smell picture of the world. He had, on occasion, tried to make him jealous of his own full color vision. The canine could not have cared less. Besides, his attention span was too short for him to really get into deep descriptions of art or sunsets before he would catch a whiff of a squirrel or a bitch and no longer be listening. People who don't know dogs well, and there are some, think that they can talk to dogs like they do to people, which is laughable. Dogs have never been deep thinkers. Throughout history there have never been dog philosophers, or dog writers or dog scientists, but there *have* been many dog saints. Their strength was love and loyalty and a natural honesty. It is commonly said that they never lie and they never cheat and are deeply

perplexed if they are lied to or cheated on. It's not really true, but dogs are notably *bad* at lying and cheating and only tend to get away with it with other dogs. In general, dogs are credited with great faithfulness and nobility and a capacity for unconditional love.

Jack's Garf was the most noble of them all. Jack had been painting him lately, four canvases so far. He wanted to capture that spark of his soul that made him so special.

Garf was whelped by his sister's companion, Grna. The pup loved Jack almost as soon as his eyes had opened and learned to call his name when he was only ten weeks old. Grna brought him to Jack when he was weaned and, by custom, he knew that he had to take young Garf even though he was on his way to college in a month. That was seven years ago and Garf was now in prime middle age. He had a pretty large vocabulary, twice that of the average dog, but tended to misuse words a lot. Jack would frequently hear "pedicure" when Garf meant "pedestrian" or "light-bulb" for "lighter".

He was handsome. Grna had been a golden retriever, but she never said who had gotten the pups on her. She probably wasn't sure herself. Whoever he had been, he was also a large dog, probably some sort of mastiff. Garf had a high forehead and deep, intelligent, golden eyes. He was burly and shaggy with dark brown fur save for one white rear leg and a white streak across one eye. To Jack, he was one of the finest of the sons of Aruf.

After his initial pirouette outside the door, Garf sprinted off covering a hundred yards in the blink of an eye.

"What is it, Garf?" Called Jack.

The dog's voice came back faintly, "Dunno. Woodchuck, maybe." Jack noticed that he seemed to have totally forgotten about his bladder.

There came a surprised bark and then a howl! Jack started running as fast as he could to where he had last seen the dog. "Garf! Are you alright?" He called. He heard a whine from behind a shrub. Looking around he saw Garf with a miserable expression and a defeated posture. He had several porcupine quills in his nose and lips.

"I was stupid, Jack." He said.

“Damn it, Garf. You scared me, I thought you were really hurt!”

“It *does* hurt, Jack. Make it stop.”

“Yeah, yeah…come along, big fella.”

They went back to the house and Jack carefully pulled out the spines and dabbed the punctures with Oragel. Garf hated the smell, but tolerated it because it helped the pain. Jack also gave him a slice of salami that seemed to make Garf forget the whole episode. They watched a baseball game together although Garf snoozed through much of it. He only really paid attention when Pittsburgh was playing because of Kraulo, his favorite fetcher being in the outfield. Jack was more into the human players because he was interested in batting averages.

As Garf slept, Jack, for some reason found himself thinking of his first companion, Olo, who had been killed when he was thirteen. Olo had been completely different from Garf. In retrospect, he reminded Jack of Servius, Hamlet’s sage companion in the famous Shakespeare play. A human had always played the role on stage because he had too many lines for a dog to remember, but in the film with Lawrence Olivier, Craghoph, the first great dog actor of talking pictures played the role because he only had to remember a few lines at a time. Olo didn’t have the noble profile of Craghoph, but he did have Servius’ commonsense wisdom. Olo died because he was old and going deaf and didn’t hear a car coming. Young Jack was heartbroken and swore not to keep another dog, but Garf was brought to him and loved him unconditionally from the first moment.

Jack looked over at Garf. He kicked in his sleep and muttered. “Got you porky……rrrrrrr.” He snorted and kicked again, “not so tough without quills are ya?” Jack laughed, but no so loudly he would wake his friend from so nice a dream.

Jack went into the city once a week to check in with a gallery that showed his work. Venues like this have sold a painting of two for him in the past, but not so many that he could give up his job.

The train to Boston was not as crowded as Jack had seen it on some days, but plenty crowded enough for his taste. Garf spent most of his time in the front of the car with a few other dogs only occasionally making the rounds

of the seats politely asking passengers if they had any treats they wanted to share. Most dogs cannot be dissuaded from mooching and most of their companions give up trying pretty early in the game. A dog's human would merely discipline him if he got too pushy, that is if the victims of his attentions didn't do so first. Jack just hoped that Garf would take no for an answer and not get himself cuffed on the head too many times. Begging was really only considered cute in puppies.

Garf stopped by the seat of a young woman who was eating a salami sandwich. He *loved* salami. He gave her the big eyes and then caught a slight whiff of something else. He put on his most innocent voice. "Excuse me miss, why did you leave your dog at home?" He was hoping that she, in fact, hadn't and that the bitch was somewhere else on the train.

The woman looked at him and smiled. She was well aware that dogs knew things that were invisible to humans. "I think you know why."

Garf wasn't really too slick. He had tipped his hand that he had smelled bitch in heat on the woman. He grinned sheepishly.

"I know it's second best, but would you like some salami?"

"Nice lady!" Said Garf wagging his tail with enthusiasm.

Garf came by Jack's seat and put his paws on the arm. Leaning into his face he said "Hi Jack!"

"Sweet Jesus, Garf! What the hell have you been eating?"

"Garlic and pepper dry salami!"

"Well, stop breathing it on me, if you don't mind!"

Feldma's gallery-café was on the corner of Essex and Newbury Street, just a short subway ride from North Station.

Ron Rosenberg called himself "Feldma" for business purposes. The old painted sign over the door had never been removed since the place had been "Feldman's Spa and Sandwich" back in the 60's. The distressed sign now simply said "Feldma", the N having been erased by decades of weather, with the word "Gallery" added by a graffiti artist directly on top of the words

“spa and sandwich.” The name was established and in his mind it was catchier than Rosenberg.

When they entered Feldma waved and said, “You have *two* sales!”

Jack grinned in response, as did Garf, even though he didn’t “get” Jack’s work.

Feldma continued. “Word is spreading, my friend. *Everyone* is going to want an original Jackson Hayes!”

“*Everyone*? Let’s not get carried away.”

Feldma put his fists on his hips like a scolding mother. “Everyone who’s anyone!” The gallery owner leaned down nose to nose with Garf. “And how is Garfy-warfy today?” He cooed. “*How* is Garfy-warfy?!?”

Garf growled and snapped his jaws an inch from Feldma’s nose. Feldma pulled his face back in alarm and snarled, “Savage!”

“C’mon, Feldma, you know he hates baby talk”. Feldma wasn’t good with dogs.

“Thinks I’m a dumb puppy.” Muttered Garf.

“S’ok, buddy. He didn’t mean anything by it.”

Feldma composed himself. Jack found his attitude reminiscent of Margaret Dumont. “Anyway”, he continued, “I want to show at least five more pieces immediately.”

Jack was delighted. If he continued like this he might be able to go part time at the bookstore. With check in pocket, he and Garf left the gallery.

Garf wanted to go to the Dog’s Haven at Trinity Church. Dogs enjoyed worship in large groups so whenever he got a chance, Garf went to a big city church.

The Dog’s Haven was a separate chapel within the great church. It was impressive looking although the colors were muted in recognition of canine

monochrome vision. On the wall above the altar hung a crucifix with suffering Christ and mourning dog at the base of the cross. There is much folklore about Saint Natra (called Nathus in the Roman church, his doggish name is lost to history), the canine companion of Jesus although he is only referred to a few times in the gospels and then only briefly. There is in fact a whole Gospel of Natra arising from the Gnostic tradition that tells of his ministry after the crucifixion and his eventual martyrdom by stoning. The stoning of Natra has long been a popular theme for painters, the most famous version being that of Artemisia Gentileschi. In her version, the stoning is shown taking place at sunrise with deep chiaroscuro shadows. Half in shadow stands Natra, a rope around his neck ties him to an iron ring set in a stone wall. The first stone has struck him and some blood shows on his ribs. The canine saint looks up in pain and resignation and with forgiveness for his executioners. The man who has thrown the first stone points to show the injury he has done. A bored looking Roman soldier stands to one side. It is one of Jack's favorite paintings.

Humans tended to find the chapel had an unpleasant odor because worshipers always marked with a few drops of urine upon entering. On major holidays, many humans would find it almost impossible to enter, but that was not the case today. There were only about twenty dogs in the large room all of them were flat on their bellies before the altar as the dog priest delivered his sermon. Garf went up and prostrated himself on the floor while Jack seated himself in a pew near the back. Jack was raised Episcopalian, but didn't attend church often and considered himself agnostic. Garf, like most dogs whatever their faith, was intensely devout.

The priest was speaking of duty. "We are called to run with God's pack, one and all and to submit to his ways and will. To stray from the pack of God is to forget our duty." At this, the congregation laid back their ears and emitted soft howls. "Even the mightiest leader of the largest pack will joyfully show his belly to the almighty!" The entire congregation rolled over exposing their undersides and barked lustily.

Jack understood that this was very moving for dogs. To him it seemed silly, not that he would ever consider saying so in Garf's presence.

After Garf had his fill of sacred groveling, He and Jack took a walk through the Public Garden before taking the train back north. Garf reveled in the festival of strange scents that Jack was blind to and kept running off to

and fro to discover their origins. Jack indulged him and just enjoyed the Garden.

"Jack!" His name was called and he looked to see Bill Davis coming his way led by Garf. "Look who I found, Jack!" Exclaimed the dog.

"Damn, Jack! It's been an age!" Bill gave Jack an almost painful bear hug.

"Bill, what the hell have you been doing?"

"Web design for WGBH."

"So no work today?"

"Nah, I have Mondays off. I'm free as an Irish dog today. Do you want to grab lunch?"

"I can't today, we have to get back, but I'll be down again next weekend and we'll do something then if you have the time." They made plans to do just that and jack and Garf got on the Subway for North Station.

As they waited for the train, Garf asked, "Why do people say that, Jack?"

"Say what?"

"Free as an Irish dog."

"Oh. Well, you know that a dog must have a master or a mistress?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Across the ocean is the country of Ireland, You've heard of it?"

"Where they make the delicious black beer!" Jack had given Garf a little saucer of Guinness on certain special occasions.

"That's right. Well, in Ireland about a hundred and fifty years ago they made a law that said a dog didn't have to have a master and had to be paid for any work he did and could own property. It's the only place in the world

where a masterless dog can live among people. People say ‘free as an Irish dog’ to mean that no one has a claim on their time.”

“I don’t understand. I’m free, aren’t I?”

“I’m responsible for you as your companion and technically, I own you, but it is more like I’m responsible for your welfare the way a parent is responsible for a child. As a bitch must guard the welfare of her pups so a master must guard the welfare of his dog. That is how it has always been.”

“So what do the Irish dogs do?”

“Most of them live as we do although many more dogs work for a living in Ireland, mostly herding sheep, and those that do, get paid for it. They end up giving all their money back to humans because dogs don’t have hands so it makes more sense for them to pay humans to make things for them than to make them themselves. Dogs can hunt, but there is little free game in Ireland so they must mostly buy food. Dogs can’t read or write so they don’t want things like newspapers and books. Dog freedom in human society is mostly pointless.”

“It is?”

“What would you do if you were ‘free as an Irish dog’?”

“I don’t know. I’m in your pack. I would still be in your pack if I was free.”

“And I would still be in yours.”

Jack was actually unsure of the strength of his argument, but Garf, as far as he could follow it, accepted the reasoning. Jack noted to himself that this had been the first time he had discussed politics with Garf or any dog.

It was two month’s later that Bill came up to visit Jack. He was happy to get out of the city for a weekend and the famous autumn foliage of the region was at its peak.

Bill had known Garf as a puppy and adolescent dog when he was in college with Jack and Garf remembered him fondly. On that Saturday, Garf

insisted on leading Bill around the neighborhood. It worked out because Bill could take in some of the fall colors and Garf could nose around to his heart's content. Jack's place was an old farmhouse and the extensive yard had been a farm once upon a time. The land had not been worked since before the Second World War and, except for a tended area around the house itself and the driveway, had been completely overgrown with tall grass for many decades. Of course Garf loved to romp through the wild parts of the farm and he led Bill into some of his favorite places. He was just babbling on about how this tree had a really big family of squirrels or there was a rabbit warren ahead or that he knew where there was a dead raccoon, etc. Bill just said "uh-huh" a lot while he simply enjoyed the walk and Garf's enthusiasm even if he wasn't fascinated with his narrative. Garf looked over at him at one point just in time to see him suddenly drop into the Earth. He barked in alarm and dashed over to the spot where Bill had vanished. There was a hole in the ground and pieces of broken wood. An old rotted board over an unused well had given way under Bill's weight. Garf looked into the hole, but all he could see was darkness. "Bill!" He called. He repeated Bill's name several more times before he finally heard a groan of pain from far below.

"Garf…what happened?"

"You fell down a hole! Are you o.k?"

Garf heard Bill moving and then a cry of pain. He finally spoke in a thin, weak voice. "I think my leg is broken pretty bad."

"Don't move, Bill. I'll go get Jack!"

The dog bolted back for the house as fast as he could leaping over rocks and mounds of tall grass. He ran full speed into the house and found Jack at his easel. He tried to speak but the words tripped over one another in an incoherent jumble and he started barking in frustration.

"Good Lord, Garf! What is it? Calm down and tell me!"

Garf subsided a bit and just sat and panted for a few seconds. Finally he was able to speak. "Bill fell down a wall!"

"Fell down a wall? Do you mean *off* a wall?"

“A wall, a wall! A hole in the ground for water!”

“A *well*! Holy shit! Is he alright?”

“He’s trapped and he’s got a broken leg.”

“Take me to him!”

The fire department got Bill out, but it took some time. His leg was broken in several places and he was going to walk with a cane for the rest of his life even after it healed, but he was alive. Jack was horrified. He had the well filled in. He had sold enough paintings to afford to have the entire property cleared by a landscaping company. It was now less fun for Garf, but a lot safer. For a long time Jack felt guilt over what had happened.

Winter came and winter went. Jack kept in close touch with Bill and, almost as a consequence of the mishap, their friendship strengthened. As spring turned to summer, another change came to Jack and Garf’s lives when Jack married a local bartender, Sharon, who had a canine companion of her own, Krowl. Suddenly, the old farm seemed a lot more like a home. The two dogs became fast friends and they both looked to Jack as top dog in the pack, even though Sharon seemed to be in charge of Jack.

That Thanksgiving, they had Bill and his girlfriend as guests and after dinner Jack and Bill sat down with cocktails just to let the turkey stupor pass.

“Ya’know, Bill, I still think about it every day.”

“Think about what?”

“The accident, what might have happened.”

“Garf was with me. I was always going to be alright.”

“Sometimes I wonder. I mean what if dogs were just like all the other animals?”

Bill looked at him strangely. “They are like other animals.”

“No they’re not. They talk. We’re used to it. We never really think about it, but only humans and dogs talk. If Garf couldn’t talk, you would have died that day.”

“Oh, I’m not so sure. There was a kid’s TV show; I think it was based on a book, about a deaf-mute collie that always was able to tell humans when her master, a little boy named Timmy, was in trouble. Sometimes he would be treed by a mountain lion. Once he was even trapped down a well, but Lassie always got help!”

“Lassie? Odd name for a dog.”

“She was a deaf-mute adopted after her previous master died in an accident. She was never able to tell her real dog name, so her new master called her Lassie. In the series she was played by a dog with normal hearing.”

“It seems pretty contrived. Still, I’m glad that Garf can talk, even if he doesn’t have much to say sometimes, I’m still glad for his voice.”

52 .Loyal Before the Lord we are
And with his pack we run always.
For we are the faithful, we are the loyal
and we stand beside his table for
he will feed and nurture us and
he will lead us into paradise.
53. So let us show not only our
belly to the Lord, but also a joyful tail.

-The Gnostic gospel of Natra, chapter 5

Freedog

“The multiverse is infinite. Not merely huge. Infinite. Breathe deep and inhale the concept. Among the infinite iterations of creation is one that we would see as nearly identical to our own. In an infinite multiverse in which all possibilities are expressed, it must be there. There is another Earth. It is Earth in every way, but one creature evolved slightly divergently from its analog in our world. Here the creature that would become the dog, man’s constant companion, was just a little more adaptable and when this creature kept company with humans, he learned their speech.”

-wild speculation from the guy two barstools down

Korl pulled the wagon through the alley. He had seen a pile of cans next to a bin down a piece. He certainly smelled it. There might be a meal here as well but he had to take care. This was Borgh’s alley and Borgh’s pack was fierce. The trash he was looking for came from Quinlan’s place and Quinlan’s missus had always treated him well enough and even paid him for chores from time to time.

Korl and his wagon were a well known sight in this part of town. He made his way picking scrap and delivering this and that. It was enough to keep his belly passably full and he slept with his pack in their spot on St. Stephen’s Green. The Garda were alright with dogs staying in the park so long as they weren’t fighting.

He pulled the wagon up to the bin and got up on his hind legs putting his paws on the edge. He looked over and his eyes confirmed what his nose already knew. There were enough cans here to be worth a punt or two from the scrapman. “Thank ya saint Nathus!” he breathed.

A head popped out of the pile of cans and shouted “Oi, Korl!”

Korl let forth a high pitched yip and tumbled over backwards as another dog leapt out of the bin and landed on him licking his face. “Jaysus, Barnn! Ya near to put me heart in crossways! I thought ya were Borgh!”

Barnn stepped away from Korl looking suddenly alert. “Borgh! Is he about?!”

“Bloody amadan! It’s his alley! Have ya no nose on ya? Whose piss do ya think that is?” Barnn actually was a trifle slow. He was famous in his circle for missing the glaringly obvious. “I’ll tell ya what, I was ready to go flog the cans to the scrap man and get a chicken to share up with the lads. Ya help me lode ‘em up before Borgh or one of his flock come along and ya can have in.”

Barnn wagged his tail vigorously. “The best I had in two days has been the bit of bacon stuck to the bottom of this bin. A chicken sounds much nicer!”

“Bacon, ya say?”

“I ate it all, I’m sorry t’say.”

“Bollocks. Let’s get them cans.”

The scrap man was a Pakistani that everyone called “Mister Ali”. That day he wasn’t as generous as Korl had hoped he might be, but it was still enough for him to have a small chicken to bring back to St. Stephen’s.

Rowl and Orla were already there when Korl arrived with Barnn in tow. They were only a pack of three now. Their leader, Kragnr, had been hit by a truck two months previously and their only bitch, Nall, had disappeared a month before that. Rowl had become leader. Barnn was packless and had been for over a year. He had wanted into Kragnr’s pack, but Kragnr disliked him and chased him off every time he came near. Now that Kragnr was gone, he had a chance because at least Rowl didn’t actively hate him. That doesn’t mean he loved him either of course.

While Korl’s nose was busy at his hindquarters, Rowl spoke over his shoulder to him. “Why’d ya bring that wally along?”

“C’mon, Rowl. He’s a mate and he helped t’get the feast.”

Rowl rumbled deep in his throat, but said “Fair enough, I suppose. All ya got is that tiny bird for the four of us then?”

“And a pint of the black stuff!” As always, the barman had drawn a pint of Guinness into the plastic bucket that Korl kept with his wagon. As leader, Rowl would take half with the rest to be split by the other three.

Drooling, Barnn started to tear the wrap off the chicken when he was stopped cold by a growl behind him. He turned to face Rowl and quickly lowered his tail, but it could never have been quickly enough for Rowl's taste. Rowl put back his ears and snarled, "Who leads?"

Barnn lowered his shoulders and averted his eyes from Rowl. "Y-you do!"

"Let's see the belly, lad." Barnn rolled over on his back and whined. Rowl lunged forward and snapped his jaws just an inch short of Barnn's exposed belly. Barnn whined and rolled back and forth. Rowl sat back on his haunches and brought his ears back forward, all traces of anger gone. "I think ya get the message now. Let us say the blessing."

Orla lifted the chicken out of the wagon and tore off the paper and Korl put the bucket beside it. All four lowered their heads and Rowl said, "We ask ya Lord Jaysus Christ to place yer blessing upon this food, that by yer grace we have before us. We pray that ya bless this pack who seeks to serve ya in every way and at every waking hour, and if ya might, Lord Jaysus, to assure a place by the hearth to yer faithful companion and our patron, St. Nathus, that we also pray. Amen". All four raised their heads and let out a howl followed by a few short barks from an excited Barnn. Rowl tore off a leg and thigh for himself, then the other three rushed in to tear at the chicken. They finished off taking their turns at the bucket.

Settling down for the night, Barnn was speaking softly with Korl. "I think I might leave the city."

"Wha? Are ya going to go chase sheep about, then?"

"It's a real dog's life though, isn't it?"

" 'tis a real dog's life, sure enough, but it takes skills ya don't have. Yer seven years old, do ya expect to be learnin' 'em now?"

"I can learn 'em."

"Oh, Barnn, I say this as yer friend and with all the love in the world, but, bless ya, yer *not* a smart dog! I'll stand up for ya till the end when

someone *else* calls ya a gobshite, but the fact is yer about as sharp as a bag of socks."

Barnn took no visible offense. "So ya think I'm only suited to be diggin' in bins the rest o' me life, is that it then?"

"Ya could go to London."

"And be a '*pet*' ya mean? Have some old poof call me 'Poopsie' instead of me right name? I could do that right here in Dublin if someone would have me. I'd have to give up me vote and have me bollocks off as well I'm sure!"

"Jaysus! Dublin is the last place ya want t' do that! We have church tomorrow. St. Nathus day at that. Ya can pray on it."

Ireland is the only country in the western world where dogs have full social freedom, at least on paper.

A dog isn't as smart as a man, doesn't have hands like a man and can't do all the things a man can, so making a living as a freedog is not that easy in the city. Most in Ireland work on farms or as sheepdogs. For the ones who live in the city it's a hardscrabble existence. Some dogs are messengers, helpers for the handicapped or some similar thing. Others, like Korl, make their way as scavengers, but the great majority in Dublin are "pets". In Europe and America where dogs have no real autonomy, they are thought of as companions with a real identity and they use their "mother names", the names their bitch gave them. In Ireland, if a dog gives himself over to the life of a pet, he gives up more than in other countries. It's a contract that they will be fed, doctored, kept clean and sheltered. In return, the master may call them whatever name they want to, breed them to whom they please, sometimes subject them to ridiculous grooming and even make them wear costumes. They can even be neutered if it is written into the contract and if they are not, their offspring are automatically contracted as pets for the first eighteen months of their life. The rest of the world sees the institution of dog petdom in Ireland as a scandal as do some Irish dogs, but not enough of them to vote to make it illegal. Many dogs in Ireland find being a pet convenient. Pets live longer and are better fed. Human advocates

for dogs have brought up that even very intelligent dogs can't understand the contracts and it's not the most intelligent dogs that contract for petdom.

Most city cathedrals have a dog's haven within where canine worshipers may go, but Dublin is one of only a few European cities to have an actual dog's cathedral, St Aruul's. It was built by order of Archbishop Rokeby in the 1500's to keep dogs out of St. Mary's. Rokeby had an aversion to dogs and thus became their hero.

On St. Nathus day, the cathedral would be crowded. The humans had an expression for something that particularly stinks of urine, "Smells like St. Aruul's at the feast of Nathus!", and there was good reason for it. Outside the cathedral were posts, called "alter trees" where each attendee would mark before entering. It could be smelt for blocks even by dull nosed humans.

All dogs were welcome including pets that came attended by their "masters". Some were even "leashed" in spite of the fact that most dogs found the sight very offensive.

Rowl's pack with Barnn alongside had arrived early enough to get a place in the third row. The usual formula of the canine mass was performed before the sermon. The canine mass is distinct from the human mass in that there is different emphasis. According to the Judeo/Christian tradition, dogs have no original sin. They were not expelled from the garden, but came out of paradise voluntarily to walk beside man. Man is inherently sinful and must cleanse himself of it. Dog is inherently without sin, but must be ever vigilant not to stray into it.

Monsignor Khrann stood at the alter for the traditional recitation from the Gospel of Mark. "Jesus and the apostles walked along the road to Caina and they saw a flock of sheep in a field, and that flock was attended by a shepherd and two sheep dogs."

The dogs in his audience were attentive, tails up, some wagging.

"One of the dogs spied Jesus and ran to his heel. 'Are you not the one called Jesus who has performed healings and miracles?' He asked. 'I am Jesus. Are these your sheep?' 'They are the sheep of my master, Cephas the

shepherd.' 'I too am a shepherd.' Said the Lord, 'I lead a flock of men.' The dog asked him, 'Shall you lead only men, or may a humble dog walk at your heel?' 'You have said that you already have a master.' Said Jesus. The dog replied, 'There is a greater master than in this world, you have the smell of the Lord God! To God I give a higher faith.' Jesus smiled upon him. 'God loves you for your faith in him. What is your name?' The dog replied, 'My name is Horaff.' Jesus told him, 'You have shown such faith in the Lord that faith shall be your name. From here out you shall be called Nathus and walk at my heel.' And Jesus had the apostles pay unto the shepherd four copper coins to take Nathus with them."

In the Catholic church, the name of Jesus' dog is styled "Nathus" although the word for faithful in Aramaic is "natra". Protestants and members of the Eastern Church call him "Natra".

On hearing the part about how Jesus took up Nathus as his own, the listeners barked enthusiastically.

The monsignor read one line from later in the Gospel. "And at the foot of the cross was the sheep dog who had followed him faithfully, whining most piteously."

And finally from St. Paul's epistle to the Macedonians, he recited. "I should tell you of the sheepdog called Nathus who walked beside our Lord and how he came with the apostles to Ephesus, and he was old having lived fourteen years, but his faith to the Lord was yet great. And he went to the Ephesian dogs and said unto them, 'There is greater work than the tending of sheep and cattle or the catching of rats. To follow the way of the Lord is most holy!' And the dogs of Ephesus heard him and many took up to follow the Apostles. And the farmers and shepherds, the householders and other people of the city asked, 'Who is this cur who would have our dogs put aside their labors to follow these men?' And they found Nathus and stoned him to death, and also they drove the Apostles from that place. A woman who suffered a pox came to take away the body of Nathus and his blood touched her and her pox became healed and seeing this, she took up the way of the Lord. Amen."

The dogs howled and moaned in adoration, all except one. Barnn, perhaps for the first time in his life, wore a thoughtful expression.

On the way out, human priests handed out hard biscuits flavored with pork blood, on it stamped an image of the cross with a dog kneeling at the base, the symbol of St. Nathus. The biscuits were to symbolize the stones cast at Nathus and had been a Dublin tradition for centuries.

Korl and Barnn stopped outside the park to gnaw at their biscuits. Barnn stopped and said. “I been thinking.”
“Oh, I doubt that, lad.”

“Korl, I’m serious. Me whole life here is as useless as a chocolate teapot. Not just Dublin. Man’s world.”

Korl stopped gnawing his biscuit. It was never a good sign when a dog started referring to the world as “man’s world”. Once in a while, more often that most humans think, a dog will decide to leave the company of humans. It leads to a strange transformation. There are types of wild dogs in the world, jackals, dingoes and such, but these dogs don’t talk. Only dogs that live with humans talk and if they stop living with humans they lose the ability. Korl met a feral once. He was clearly intelligent, but thoroughly mute. He could bark and howl, but uttered not one intelligible word. He found it frightening but also somewhat attractive. He was not bound by law or custom. This dog was far more of a free dog than any “freedog”. Humans outside of Ireland use the expression “free as an Irish dog”, but all dogs know that a feral is much freer than that.

“Fuck me! Ya ain’t thinkin’ to be going wolfie, are ya? Don’t be more stupid than ya have to be, mate!”

“I’m not half the gobshite the lot of ya think me t’be. I’m just not made t’get by in this world is all.”

At that moment a young fellow passing by kicked at Korl. “Quit blocking th’pavement ya arse-sniffer! ‘Cause it’s your day ya think ya own the whole fucking town!”

Barnn jumped up and snapped at his leg. “Fuck off, ya bucket o’ snots!” he shouted and snarled menacingly.

Korl cried, “Steady, mate! No need to cause a row! I’m not hurt.” The youth ran off as the two looked on.

“Ah Korl, that ain’t th’point. They treat us like shite.” He paused for a beat. “Ya remember Garrl?”

Korl smirked. “Ya mean ‘Bruneau’, don’t ya?”

“The very one. He took the contract, they took his bollocks, gave him that shite name, dyed him bloody *pink* for Jaysus sake! He did it just t’eat and have a place by the fire! That’s the story of our whole kind! We came to be with men to have a place by the fire, but now I’m thinking the price has been too high!”

“Don’t be like that, lad. Ya know ya have it pretty good.”

“*You* have it pretty good. Ya have a pack, ya get on with the people and get jobs. That boot ya got was what I get all the time. Me whole life is a boot to the arse.”

“What if I talk to Rowl, get him t’have ya in? Have ya into the pack.”

Barnn gave his tail a half-hearted wag. “Tanks mate. I’m sorry for ya to hear me rabbit on like that, I just get so…”

“Not another word, mate. We all have our moods.”

Rowl looked doubtful. “He’s thick as a ditch! How’s that tosser gonna be of any use?”

“He just needs a hand up is all.” Said Korl. “Barnn’s not as half-witted as ya think. Once he’s in, he’ll do us all proud, you’ll see.”

Rowl rumbled softly. “We can have him in, but if he causes me too much strife I’ll bite his yockers off.”

They were distracted by a distant bark. Orla was dashing toward them full speed. He was panting when he got to them. “Barnn! ‘twas awful! Hit by a lorry!”

Korl yelped in dismay. “Jaysus! Dead?”

“Sure enough. Dead as can be. If ya had seen it, ya would know there wasn’t a doubt. I think he went loopers! He was talkin’ about how he didn’t fit inta the world. I stopped to lay a cable and he just legged it into the road...’twas like he meant to do it!”

“I always knew he was more’n half a bubble off true.” Said Rowl.

“For the love of God, Rowl! The dog is dead!” Cried Korl. “Give him *some* respect!” Korl dropped his tail and whimpered. “He was a good old lad.”

Nothing ties me down,
Or turns me ‘round.
Nothing winds me up
To cause a frown.

My whole world is open to me.
Troubled winds just blow right through me.
Everything is coming to me
‘cause I’m free as an Irish dog!

Life is just so easy,
Just as easy as can be
When I’m free as an Irish dog!

“Irish Dog” as sung by Gene Kelly in *My Own Little World* (MGM 1950)

This story is for my old pal Bill Kates

Monsters

Hamlet:
Am I to fear for your loyalty my hirsute brother?
Servius:
Master, by my life I shall always be loyal!
Adored master, for whom I live and breath,
'tis a wrong you do me to question my loyalty,
for loyal is what I am and all I know.
You have made of my pack a monster and yet I am loyal.
-Hamlet, act two, scene three.

London was crowded and noisy. Jack found it stimulating, but it made Garf skittish. The biggest city Garf had seen in his twelve years was Boston. London was completely different and filled with strange sights and stranger smells.

Jack reached down and scratched the dog behind the ear. Garf gave a slight whine. He had required a bit of extra attention from Jack since they had arrived. Although he had to attend to the details of hanging his show, he also had keep Garf close. He brought him to London for the opening of the show because he was the subject of so many of the paintings. He knew people would enjoy meeting him. It was a big deal for him, his first international show and he felt that Garf being there would bring him a bit of luck. Unfortunately, so far it had not been a good experience for Garf.

Garf was slowing down a bit from age and was not as adaptable as he once had been. He didn't like the dog foods that were available, didn't like the smell of the air or even the taste of the water. Jack had even gotten him some salami for treats, but that also tasted strange to him. Even those things didn't bother him as much as the monsters.

"Why do they do it, Jack?" He asked for the fiftieth time.

"I don't know, buddy. People are manipulative." Garf was puzzled by the long word and looked up at Jack inquiringly. "They like to change anything they get their hands on. It's the same reason I make art. Some people do that with dogs."

Garf shuddered slightly. "Do they use…knives?"

"No! Garf, no they don't. They select their mates over generations for characteristics they want."

"They want pushed in snouts and their eyes popping out?" Garf's nose was pointing at a passing Pekinese.

The bitch wagged her tail and said " 'ello!" Garf drooped his tail and whined.

Jack frowned. "Come on, don't be rude. Say hello!"

"Hello." Said Garf softly as he looked at the ground. The other dog, perplexed by Garf's unsocial attitude moved on.

"They're not bad, you know."

"I can't understand them. They have that account…"

"*Accent*."

"*Accent*, sorry. But the ones with the mashed up noses, they're even harder to understand! They're ugly…deformed."

Jack nodded. He was impressed by Garf's proper use of the word *deformed*. "People breed them that way because they think they're cute."

"Ugh."

In America, the tradition of breeding dogs in strange shapes died out around the time of the Revolution. Breeding very small dogs, docking tails, fussy grooming, it was all dismissed as being too English, too associated with the nobility. In America most dogs are of a generic breed although there are a few purebred bloodlines. Certainly there are types, hunting dogs, herding dogs and such, but no lap dogs or show dogs and none with really exaggerated features. Dog breeding is a rare enthusiasm there. Western Europe and Asia, on the other hand make no compunction over torturing the canine genome. There are dogs the size of large rats and there are dogs the size of small ponies. Dogs with very long floppy ears, dogs with loose deeply wrinkled skin, dogs with squashed faces and bugged out eyes. Dogs with faces so long and thin that their brains don't even work right and legs

so long that they can run like the wind, shaggy dogs and naked dogs. To Garf they all looked like monsters.

"Do you want to go back to the hotel, pal?"

"Yeah."

The show opening was very well received. One of the big portraits of Garf went within an hour. All in all, it ended up being a very good night with at least four of the canvases marked "sold" on their labels. For the first time since they had arrived, Garf seemed to be having a good time. He enjoyed the head pats and praise as well as treats off the table. He had never had so much cheese in his life, but it was clear to Jack that all was not well for him. He had planned to hang around London for a week or so to see the sights, but getting Garf home seemed more important. He told the dog they would leave for home the next day. Garf was excited even though he knew he would have to ride with the baggage.

At the hotel, Jack met with owner of the gallery who presented him with the biggest single check he had ever received in his life. The owner had a dog of his own with him, a quiet little pug. Garf eyed the pug with hostility when he tried to sniff his hindquarters and he backed off. Even though he was repulsed by the little creature, he couldn't stop staring at him. Finally the pug loudly inquired "Wot'n 'ell are you looking at?"

Jack and the owner broke off their conversation and the owner said to the dog. "Oh be polite now, Austin!" It was common for British dogs not to have a "mother name" like American and continental European dogs did.

"Be polite? You should see the way 'e was lookin' at me!"

"Garf?" Inquired Jack.

"I didn't do anything, Jack."

"I am so sorry! He has been acting strangely ever since we arrived. He doesn't like unfamiliar places."

The gallery owner looked disapprovingly at his dog. "Think nothing of it. Austin is a bit skittish at times."

“Me!?!” exclaimed the aggrieved pug.

“That will be enough, Austin.”

“Wanker!” Austin snarled at Garf.

“I said enough!”

For the rest of the human’s conversation the two dogs just glared at one another. Later back in the room Jack spoke to Garf. “That was embarrassing, Garf.” He said.

“What was?”

“You getting into a fight with that other dog, that’s what! Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“That wasn’t a fight! He was so little I could whup him in a second if we got into a fight!”

“Not that kind of fight. You were rude and you made me look like I haven’t trained you well. I like to think that I have, but sometimes I wonder!”

“No Jack! Don’t say that! I’m a good dog, aren’t I?” He started to whine and lay prostrate on the floor.

“Oh stop it, Garf. Of course you’re a good dog! You’re the best dog there is. This trip has been so hard on you. I promise that I’ll never make you leave New England again.”
Garf remained on his belly, but his tail wagged slightly.

Logan Airport was crowded at two in the afternoon when Feldma met them. “Jack! I heard the show went really well! Why didn’t you stay and see the sights, maybe schmooze a little?”

“Garf didn’t like it there. It was a show of paintings of him, but he wasn’t making that good an impression.”

Feldma wrinkled his brow and looked at Garf. “Garfy didn’t like England?!?” He asked with theatrical dismay.

“Garf!”, barked the dog. “It’s just ‘Garf’!”

“He hates the baby talk, Feldma. You know that.”

“Sorry Garf”, he pouted. Quickly changing the subject he said, “Even so, Jack, I think that we are going to sell most of the paintings! You have to go back and do another next year!”

“That would be great, but Garf will stay home with Sharon this time. Travel just isn’t his thing.”
A woman who had been on their plane passed by leading a shar-pei on a leash. Garf leaned up against Jack’s leg, his hackles rising. Just the tiniest of growls came forth.

“Oh! How cute!” Exclaimed Feldma.

“Monster!” muttered Garf.

Hamlet:
Nay, good Servius! Not a monster!
Man has made your pack the better!
Raised you to a higher perfection!

Servius:
Dearest master!
‘Tis the greatest failure of man to believe
that he can perfect God’s work!
Is the castle more perfect than the mountain?

-Hamlet, act two, scene three.